The Dark I Know So Well

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Summary

Four months after the botched events of Greentech Genetics and the fall of The Railroad headquarters, Nora has found herself imprisoned in the Institute. Freedom is a luxury and Nora has unwillingly become a pawn in the Institute's plans. Nick, Hancock, and the scattered Railroad members work tirelessly to rescue Nora from the Institute's clutches and also from herself. Nora's adjusted to life in the wasteland, but can she adjust to her difficult situation, especially when old demons from her past and new monsters from her present haunt her every step?

Sequel to Remember How We Forgot

Notes

This is a sequel to Remember How We Forgot and will be substantially darker in tone and
content. I will try to tag the chapter in question if it has NonCon or other unpleasantries.

Although not necessary to fully understand or enjoy this fic, you may want to go back and read it (or at least the last three chapters) to get some context. As we progress, the story diverge more and more from the established game cannon.

Kudos and any feedback are extremely appreciated. Enjoy!
Help Me, Hurt Me

Sequel to Remember How We Forgot

Chapter 1: Help Me, Hurt Me

Four Months After Greentech Genetics

Nora once thought that crawling out of Vault 111 as the sole survivor of Vault-Tec’s sadistic experiment was the greatest transformative factor in her life. Yet, as she ran along the marshy swampland of eastern Boston, Nora knew she was wrong. She now considered the day the courser kidnapped her and brought her to the Institute as the day that finally killed Nora as she once existed. In her place -- thanks to science -- Nora was redefined; she was reborn.

Some of the upgrades she received in this figuratively new life were the very cybernetic implants that Kellogg had on his body when he died. Installing cybernetics into Nora was just one ‘condition’ that Ayo had stipulated when he persuaded Father about just how useful she could be for the SRB. Even though Father didn’t approve at first, Ayo was nothing if not persistent and Nora was scheduled for the implantation two weeks after arriving at the Institute. The process was excruciatingly painful, but along with the cybernetics implanted into her skull, Ayo also implanted a courser chip so she could always be reached. The mental subjugation from being under his thumb was terrible, but the way he looked at Nora -- with thinly veiled contempt and lust -- was often worse than the splitting migraines and the violent mood swings that she had to contend with. No, the door to Nora’s gilded cage had swung open, but her gilded leash would only stretch so far.

As a result of the surgeries, her brown hair was cropped short and her right side was shaved close to the scalp to make the cybernetic easier to access. Still, Nora insisted on keeping her left part longer; there the hair hung straight at her chin. X6-88 once told her that he didn’t understand why her hairstyle mattered so much when she was in a ruined bathroom in the wasteland fussing over how she looked. He told her that having hair long enough to grab was a tactical disadvantage, but Nora just told him to shut his god damned mouth.

The synth courser, X6-88, accompanied Nora everywhere she went. This was the very same man who Nora thought took ten year old Shaun from Kellogg and brought him to the Institute. She quickly learned the reality of everything -- the shock of which she was still trying to process.

The fact that he followed her everywhere was stipulation number two coming directly from Father himself. He wanted to make sure that she could be trusted. That was just one deal among many that ensured that Nora would fall in line.

Stipulation number three was that she have no contact with any former friends, acquaintances, and Railroad agents. If any should approach her, Nora was instructed to open fire.

On her first day topside, Nora was working reconnaissance down by the Mass Fusion building. X6-88 was waiting for her inside, but as she was about to go in, she saw Hancock come out of Goodneighbor with Nick braced against him for support. She heard their loud voices down the alley and froze in panic.

“C’mon Nicky, you gotta walk. You gotta built up your endurance.” The ghoul said.

“Dammit Hancock, Amari explained all of this quite clearly to me. I’m not an invalid. I don’t need
The ghoul chuckled at the synth’s churlish attitude. He knew Nicky wouldn’t admit that he couldn’t physically walk farther than a city block without getting winded -- he was too damn stubborn and prideful like that --, but he still needed Hancock at his side. The two had temporarily set aside their differences and posturing over Nora to focus on somehow getting their girl back from the Institute’s clutches.

They came around the corner faster than Nora anticipated; she was caught and both men looked into her frightened eyes.

Nick’s good arm was braced around Hancock’s neck as he limped slowly along. Hancock’s dark eyes widened in shock and disbelief as he saw Nora first.

“Nicky, I ain’t hallucinating this am I?” He breathed out. Hancock looked at Nora in awe and exuberance. He looked like a man dying of thirst who had just found an oasis in the desert. Now he just needed to make sure that the oasis wasn’t just a cruel mirage.

Nick, on the other hand, looked physically pained upon seeing Nora. A shudder tore from his throat carrying guilt and anger when he breathed out her name.

“Nora. Is that really you?” Nick felt sure he was dreaming or that his system was experiencing a glitch thanks to the extensive tinkering that Amari did to his internal servos and processors.

Nora wanted to run to both of them. She wanted to get swept up in their jubilation and happiness at her return. She imagined how Hancock would pick her up and hug her tightly and how Nick’s yellow eyes would smolder beneath his fedora as she kissed him gently. They’d go back to Goodneighbor; Nick holding on to Nora and Hancock leading the way. They’d all celebrate down in the Third Rail; Charlie would grumble something incoherent and irritable as the ghoul Mayor would call for a round for the house. Nick would never let her leave his side and Hancock would get great satisfaction in the challenge of enticing Nick’s girl out onto the dance floor. Nora wanted to live in that fantasy, but the cold reality of her situation and what she would be forced to do if they came too close washed over her like a caustic acid rain full of bitterness and pain.

Instead, she bolted. Nora blindly tore down an alley and heard the mens’ cries of protest. Nora knew that Nick was in no shape to pursue her, but she could hear Hancock’s heavy footsteps a ways behind. She turned a corner and bolted up and over an overturned semi that was buried in some rubble and cut west towards the fallen overpass.

“Nora, wait!” Hancock called out. He saw her as she rounded the corner ahead of him, but she had a sizable lead and his hopes of catching her were dashed.

Nora ducked beneath the crumbling exit ramp that led to the overpass and squeezed herself as far into the corner as she could. She felt like a trapped animal burrowing in its den, and like one, she would be forced to lash out if cornered. Nora unholstered her laser pistol and prayed that she wouldn’t have to use it.

A small hole through the concrete and rebar was Nora’s only visual aid and she saw Hancock running down the alleyway towards her. The ghoul’s hat was askew and he was without his trademark jacket for once. A white loose dress shirt was tucked into his dark trousers. The sleeves on his shirt were rolled up to the elbows which exposed his sinewy forearms to the autumn breeze.

“Nora. Please, we can help you.” He rasped loudly, his dark eyes looked around as he tried to find any small hints as to where Nora had gone.
Nora didn’t move. She barely breathed. Her body felt cold and she felt nauseous from the stress and anxiety crackling through her body. She knew that Ayo and his team would be getting readings of her stress via the courser chip that was implanted in her head. Perhaps Ayo would cut her down with a snide remark about the undesirables that she used to fraternize with and how Nora should’ve cut Hancock down where he stood. After all, cybernetics would’ve made her unstoppable, even against a seasoned fighter like Hancock.

Thankfully it didn’t come down to that. Hancock sighed and looked around once more before he turned around and walked back down the alleyway. Still, Nora remained in her hiding spot for a good fifteen minutes more before she slunk out and crept along the alleys back to the Mass Fusion building. When she finally entered into the darkened reception area, X6 appraised her suspiciously.

“You were supposed to report here twenty-seven minutes ago, Mother.” He said disapprovingly. His voice was cold and unemotional.

Nora knew she couldn’t lie. The Institute had eyes and ears everywhere and she couldn’t risk breaking Father’s trust after she worked so hard to gain it. Going topside was what gave her hope in the hopeless, sterile place. If they took that away from her, Nora knew she would wilt away and die. She had already planned for it.

“I encountered two people. They recognized me and one of them pursued me. I didn’t want to compromise our operation here so I led him down the alleyway and managed to evade him.” Nora’s voice felt just as hollow and emotionless as X6’s.

X6 narrowed his eyes in suspicion, “Why not just open fire? You can surely overpower one wastelander. Your cybernetics enhance any physical and mental faculties far beyond that of a human’s normal capacities.”

“I didn’t open fire because the wastelander is a prominent member of Goodneighbor. Killing him would incite a war that the Institute wouldn’t want.” Nora replied quickly and coolly, mimicking the synth’s detached countenance.

“Hmph. Very well.” X6 replied. “It seems Dr. Ayo was wrong about you, Mother. You’ve fallen in line. Father will be pleased to read about this in my report.”

“Ma’am, how would you like to engage the enemy hostiles?” X6 asked seemingly bored with their excursion already. “Keep in mind that we cannot kill the synth called Gabriel.”

X6’s question had drawn Nora out of her daydream. Nora peered through small binoculars and saw at least a dozen raiders milling about on the floating platforms and half-sunk barges. The cybernetics were telling her that Gabriel was in the bow of an upturned, partially sunken ship that had been repurposed into a hideout. He was also surrounded by three bodyguards.

“We need to divide and conquer.” Nora commanded. “You take the platforms on the left and I’ll take the right. Over in that small tugboat there should be a terminal to turn off the turrets and spotlights. Doing that should give us enough cover in the dark to ambush Gabriel in the ship.”

X6 nodded and unholstered his Institute pistol. Nora pulled out her own matching gun in turn. The 10mm that old Nora used to carry was long gone, yet she couldn’t deny that she missed its weight in her hands.

“Let’s move out.” She ordered coldly.
Finding a suitable hideout once the Old North Church had been compromised was nigh impossible. Desdemona, Tom, and Carrington fought off as many Gen-1 synths as they could, but with Deacon, Glory, and Drummer Boy at Greentech, they were severely outmanned. Eventually, they were forced to retreat with PAM and then split up. Tom brought PAM to Goodneighbor and left her in KL-E-O’s company and then went on his way down to the Mercer Safehouse to see if he could be of any assistance with the synth relocation efforts.

Desdemona and Carrington made haste to Greentech when Drummer Boy’s distress beacon came up on one of Tom’s several radios. Nick’s frantic voice cut out over the airwaves, “Nora’s been taken. We’ve got a man down and -- argh, fuck,” his voice panted, “you may have another on his way. One gunshot wound to the chest and another to the stomach. Send help. Save Nora.”

Carrington arrived on the scene first and found that Nick was trying to tend to Deacon’s wound before he fell unconscious. Empty stimpacks and Med-X syringes were scattered at their feet, but the spy was barely breathing. The synthetic weave was burned into the wound. Although incredibly painful and impossible to operate on in a field setting, the melted synthetic weave stopped Deacon from bleeding out completely.

Desdemona and another Railroad agent lifted Deacon onto a makeshift stretcher and carried him out into the lobby. They enshrouded his body with a white sheet to keep up appearances that the Institute had successfully killed one of their own and carried him out into the night.

Meanwhile Carrington turned his attention to Nick. His wound was more tricky to manage because stimpacks and painkillers had no effect on his mechanical pain receptors. He couldn’t shut down one part of his body without doing a full shutdown on his entire system. Nick had to either be awake and conscious during Carrington’s entire operation, or put himself into a system diagnostic scan and hope that he came out of it okay. The thought of never waking up -- of never seeing Nora again -- scared him too much. He gritted his teeth and dealt with the searing pain as Carrington wrapped a tourniquet around Nick’s severed tubing.

When Nick regained consciousness, he saw that Deacon’s body was gone and assumed the worst. That was the message that he brought with him to Goodneighbor, and that was Nick’s truth. Deacon, the insufferable but devoted spy, had fallen to a courser’s bullet. Nick witnessed a lot of death and devastation in his long life as a synth, but Deacon’s death reminded him too much of the good men that Pre-War Nick had served with on the police force. He felt that Deacon’s memory should be honored in some small way, but when he brought this up to Desdemona nearly a month later, she rejected the sentiment citing that it would draw too much attention to them.

What Des really meant was that Deacon’s survival was the Railroad’s last closely guarded secret. Only Desdemona and Carrington knew that he had survived, and they were the only two who knew where he was now hiding out. After another bout of facial reconstruction surgery courtesy of Dr. Sun in Diamond City, Deacon the spy was masquerading as Miguel the caravaner. He traveled the same routes as the rest of the caravans and sold produce, seeds, farming supplies, and some small weapons to the area’s farmers. Unlike Lucas and Cricket who sold high-need, expensive items, Deacon didn’t draw attention to himself. Instead, he preferred to listen in on other peoples’ conversations, and relay the intel back to Des via their dead drop system.

Hancock paced in front of the large map of Boston that was tacked up in his office. Nick sat on the chaise lounge smoking a cigarette and cleaning his pistol. After their first encounter with Nora outside of the Mass Fusion building, they both had only heard rumors and whispers of rumors about her elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

One informant told Hancock that they saw her out near Greygardens accosting a man who went by
the name of Wallace while another said that they saw a woman steal a suit of Power Armor from a
dead Brotherhood Knight and open fire on nearly a dozen Super Mutants who had taken up
residence in an abandoned housing development.

No matter the rumors, Hancock and Nick knew that Nora had changed. In addition to the
concerning physical changes -- the bags under her eyes, the technological augmentation that marred
her face, and the way she spooked at the slightest opportunity -- their Nora was now hardened by
the wasteland. Their Nora hid behind cold eyes, a hulking laser pistol, and a volatile attitude.

Rumors of Nora’s possible mental instability spread quickly, but unlike the rumors about her
locations and alleged deeds, Hancock believed in these stories without a doubt. He believed in
them because Nora was acting just like he did when he slung Vic’s bloody and mutilated body over
the balcony on a hangman’s noose. She was conflating justice with murder. Nora was pissed off
and rightfully so.

The most recent deed attributed to Nora and her synth bodyguard was the massacre of a small,
seemingly peaceful, settlement just south east of Lexington. The place was called Covenant and
although it had a reputation for being ‘don’t-drink-the-kool aid’ cheerful, the people there never
caus ed problems with others. That is until word got out through the grapevine that one of
Stockton’s caravans from Bunker Hill went missing and his daughter was kidnapped by ruffians. A
week after the rumor had reached Hancock, another rumor followed on its tail but this one was
substantiated with evidence.

According to eyewitness accounts, Covenant was raised to the ground. The entire community was
slaughtered and their pristine Pre-War houses were burned to ash. Nobody knows whether
Stockton’s daughter was ever recovered, but a dark haired woman dressed in black leather was seen
leaving the smoldering town in a flash of blue light.

It had taken Hancock several years and nearly a truckload of chems to justify his actions about the
takeover of Goodneighbor to himself, but he knew that Nora would be far more affected even if she
somehow repressed or compartmentalized those feelings. One day the dam would break and Nora
would need someone to walk her through the guilt and pain.

“Mister Valentine. Mayor Hancock!” Drummer Boy huffed as he sprinted into the room wide-eyed
and excited. “One of our informants said that they saw a person matching Nora’s description. She
and that courser were heading towards the raider base outside of The Libertalia.”

“Libertalia’s not too far away, but there’s nothing except Raiders out there.” Nick commented, “I
wonder why the Institute would send her there.”

Drummer Boy shifted uneasily in front of the men. “She may be after Gabriel. We had Amari wipe
his memories a year or so back and then brought him to Kendall Hospital. We lost contact after
that, but rumors surfaced six months ago that he’s taken up with some Raiders out where Nora’s
been spotted.”

“Well let’s get going then,” Hancock replied, grabbing his gun and his jacket from the table.

Drummer Boy and Nick followed the ghoul out and left Goodneighbor at a run. Thankfully, they
made it to the place in question in record time, but feared that they were too late. Raiders’ bodies
floated face down in the water as they picked their way across the sodden planks and waterlogged
decks. They realized that they were just in time when then they heard the terrified screams of
a man echo from inside the upturned ship.

The three men crept across the wooden platform and stopped just shy of the main deck. A door
flew open above them and a raider backed up against the railing.

“You can’t take me back there!” He pleaded. His long hair was matted and tangled, and his fingers gripped around the wooden railing as though he was trying to fuse himself into the wood.

“B5-92, you killed people. Many innocent lives died because you left the safety and protection of the Institute.” Nora’s voice was quiet and authoritative. Nick and Hancock watched in awe and fear as their once uncertain Nora administered swift justice.

“No! NO! I didn’t know. My memories were wiped. I wasn’t myself. You have to believe me.”

Hancock slipped into the ship’s underbelly while Nick watched the scene unfold. He didn’t even see the ghoul leave until it was too late to stop him.

“Your decision to search out those terrorists known as The Railroad is now something you must atone for. You not only betrayed Father, but you also hurt innocent lives. You will pay.”

Nora pointed the Institute pistol at the raider and in a cool, detached voice said “B5-92 authorize factory reset. Authorization gamma, seven, one, epsilon.”

The raider’s chin dropped to his chest and X6 grabbed the man by the arm before he fell over.

“Nice work, Mother. He’s subdued. I’ll relay ahead and give my report to the SRB. Please follow close behind. I do not want to come back to retrieve you.”

Nora nodded. “Once I download the data from his terminal, I’ll be right behind you.”

The courser and the deactivated synth disappeared in a flash of blue light. Beneath the moon’s bright light, Hancock saw just how tired Nora looked. Her fatigue wasn’t just physical exhaustion but of mental exhaustion that came from sleepless nights full of worry and pain.

“Sunshine...” Hancock said carefully as he walked out from behind the corner.

Nora turned abruptly and faced the ghoul. Her eyes went cold and she pointed her rifle at Hancock’s chest.

“Stay away from me you ghoul freak.” She growled.

Hancock let the insult roll off his back and raised his hands up in surrender. He had faith that it wasn’t really Nora talking. The cold metal that stretched across her temple like a technological leech glinted threateningly in the moonlight. He assumed that she was speaking under duress or that someone had ahold of her mind and was speaking for her.

“Nora, sunshine. I know you’re in there somewhere.” He pleaded and walked slowly towards her “Please, we can help you. Nicky’s here with me. We can protect you. You don’t have to do this anymore.”

Hancock’s rough hand gently grazed her bare arm and for a split second he saw fear, sorrow, and pain in Nora’s eyes. Tears leaked from them and her arm trembled slightly beneath his touch. Then as quick as the emotion came it left again and Nora’s eyes narrowed and hardened. She jerked her arm away from his touch and backed away from him in earnest.

“Touch me again and I’ll remove your head from your shoulders.” She hissed. As if to punctuate her point, the pistol was now aimed at Hancock’s head.
He backed away carefully until Nora lowered the weapon slightly. Then acting purely on instinct, Hancock rushed forward to grab both of Nora’s arms to immobilize her. As soon as his skin touched hers, Nora moved her head back in a deft jerking motion and managed to hit Hancock’s face with the back of her head. He knew that if he had a nose, it would’ve been broken. Then Nora pulled one of her arms from his grasp and elbowed him in the mouth. The ghoul reeled backwards and fell onto his back with a bloodied lip. Nora’s eyes bore into his and she put the plastic barrel sharply against Hancock’s ruined forehead.

“This is Mother requesting relay transport. Our location has been compromised.” She spoke coolly into her sleeve.

Nora looked hard at Hancock and then glanced up into Nick’s frightened eyes. His pistol was drawn but he was aiming it at the floor. He had rushed up the stairs when he heard the commotion, and Drummer Boy wasn’t far behind. If her eyes held disgust for the ghoul, then Nora’s eyes held nothing but venomous contempt for the synth detective.

“Stop following me.” She commanded. “Father doesn’t give second chances.”

A crackling blue light swirled around her body and momentarily blinded the trio until they were the only ones left standing in the wrecked wharf.

The SRB bustled like a city center at high noon when Nora arrived back at the Institute. Immediately a courser-in-training came to disarm her, pat her down, and check her pockets and messenger bag for additional weapons. Father allowed all coursers, except Nora, to carry weapons while on the premises. This limitation was just another one of his ‘conditions’ which allowed her to go topside while still holding the leash tight enough to feel his influence.

“You’re good to go, Mother.” The synth-in-training said. The door slid open automatically and Nora walked into the SRB main chamber. X6 and Gabriel were already long gone, but Justin Ayo caught Nora’s eye and smirked.

“X6 has filled me in on your mission recovering the synth from Libertalia.” Ayo replied. Sarcasm cloyed in his voice like a snake ready to strike, “He offers you his compliments on bringing the synth back successfully. For X6, that’s quite high praise.”

“Tell him that I thank him for his assistance topside. The mission wouldn’t have gone as smoothly without his aid.” Nora replied coldly.

“Indeed.” Ayo sneered. “And I suppose the encounter with your ghoul friend and synth lover had no effect on your mission.”

Nora glowered at the scientist. She knew that he’d be listening in via the cybernetic. Although it couldn’t record her own thoughts (unless she spoke them aloud), any and all sounds were relayed back to the Institute and analyzed. Ever since Hancock had tasked people to kill Ayo’s Watchers, the man suggested that Nora’s cybernetic be modified to allow audio recording. His reasoning was that if Hancock and her friends wanted to be fully rid of the Institute’s influence, they’d have to kill Nora too.

“My encounter with the ghoul and the synth had no influence on the operation.” Nora bit out. “The rouge synth was still captured and the threats were subdued or eliminated.”

“No!” Ayo yelled. “ALL of the threats should’ve been eliminated. Or did you forget your agreement with Father? You are to open fire on anyone who stands in your way. We can’t have our coursers picking and choosing who they are going to spare. The wastelanders will take that as a
Nora’s heart raced from fear, anger, and anxiety. She wanted to run; she had found a construction sight deep below the Institute on accident and often went there when her room was feeling much too claustrophobic, but she forced herself to remain rooted to the spot so she could stare down Ayo.

“I did what was best for the Institute. Killing the ghoul would’ve upset Goodneighbor, and killing the synth would’ve started a riot with half of Diamond City. Do you really want two of the largest communities in the Commonwealth trying to break down the Institute’s doors?” Nora snapped back.

“You’ve used this excuse before.” Ayo replied dismissively. “Do you really think that your ghoul means that much to that slum? He’ll be replaced by the next low life addict and our plant in Diamond City will help maintain order if things get out of hand there. Stop hiding behind your fake desire to protect the Institute. That may work with Father, but I know the truth.”

Ayo walked up to her and Nora had to fight the urge to take a step back. She knew he was doing this to intimidate her, but she refused to be cowed by the bully.

“You are dismissed, Mother.” He growled. His face was inches from hers and she could smell the mint from the toothpaste that he used.

Before she made it to the door, Ayo then drawled out “Father will get my full report -- audio and all -- so consider your next moves carefully. You are a helpful little mole, but I won’t tolerate any lapses in your resolve. You are fully committed to me as my courser or not at all. If you see those two abominations again, you will shoot them. Do you understand me?”

Nora couldn’t look at him. She could feel the possessive stare on her back like a sniper’s dot. Ayo wanted her complete obedience, but Nora also knew that he wanted her physically as well. Over the past four months of her incarceration with the Institute, he had made his predilections quite clear. Heated glances masqueraded as pure vitriol when people who mattered could see, but then it had progressed so much further. Touches became longer than appropriate and unannounced visits to her private quarters started two weeks ago. No, Nora was a bird trapped in a gilded cage with a prowling tom cat ready to devour her upon first sign of weakness.

“Yes, I understand.” Nora finally said. Her voice was quiet, barely above a whisper, but she couldn’t trust herself to speak any louder.


“Yes, sir. I understand.” She gritted through her teeth.

The automatic door slid open. Nora managed to make it back to her living quarters before she lost her temper. In a blind rage, she hurled a heavy microscope across the room and watched in perverse satisfaction as it cracked along its neck and as the internal mirrors shattered into beautiful crystalline pieces.

She sank to her knees and then collapsed onto the ground. Her head was pounding -- partially from the stress but also partially from the cybernetic -- and she pushed the button on the wall near the door.

“How can I assist you, Mother?” Allie Fillmore asked through the intercom.

“My head is killing me. Can I have some aspirin?” Nora asked.
All non-emergency medical requests went through Allie. Nora was allowed aspirin once every two days and was allowed to take sleeping pills once a week. However, starting two months ago, Nora began hoarding the pills as one last ace up her sleeve if things became too bad. Between acting as the Institute's angel of vengeance and destruction, the crippling loneliness, and Ayo's bolder advances, Nora wondered if that moment was on the horizon. Of course, to keep up appearances, she had to use some of the medicine for its intended purpose, but having a way out kept the waters of panic from fully drowning her.

“Right away Mother.” Allie replied. “Will you be accepting your meal in your room tonight?”

“Yes, please.” Nora replied. “Product #8 if you’d be so kind.”

The food at the Institute was a colored paste that was served in a thermonuclear pouch. After cracking the packaging open and putting it into a heating bag for five minutes, the food was ready to be consumed. The paste had an unpleasant gel-like consistency and the flavors were often nondescript and they blended together with one another. Still, Nora forced herself to choke the food down. It wasn’t satisfying -- not like the way the steaming, salty broth from Takahashi’s noodle stand could warm even the coldest of hearts -- and it didn’t offer anything outside of nutritional sustenance, but it kept her strong and healthy enough to clear the required courser fitness tests so she could go topside.

Nora tore off her black leather clothes, put them in a dropbox by her door for the night shift synths to collect and launder, and turned the shower on to it’s hottest setting. She felt compelled to take scalding showers. Not only to wash the blood off her skin but also to feel something other than numbness brought on by the pain, hopelessness, and fear. She adjusted the tap so it was just hot enough to be uncomfortable, but not too hot that she would get first degree burns, and drew the curtain around her.

She closed her eyes and let the water hit her face. Tears mingled with the heated water droplets and she put both of her hands on the tiled wall to prevent herself from collapsing. Nora ignored the razor and the soap -- not trusting her trembling hands from accidentally (or purposefully) cutting herself while shaving -- and just let the water cleanse her. Nora heard the door bell ring to her room, so she shut the water off, and wrapped herself in a coarse white towel.

She undid the towel, pulled on an oversized t-shirt that fell to her upper thigh, and then wrapped herself up again to preserve her modesty and to hide her thinly-veiled breasts from sight in case Ayo was deciding to torment her some more.

When she opened the door, she breathed out a sigh of relief to find that it was just Liam Binnet and he was carrying a metal cafeteria tray with her food, two capsules of aspirin, and a bottle of purified water.

“Hey Liam.” Nora replied. “Thanks for the food. I’m sorry that you had to bring it all the way up here. Why didn’t you send a synth?”

The young man, who couldn’t be older than seventeen, looked sheepish and tucked his hands into his pant pockets.

“I’m doing this as penitence.” He replied. “I’m being grounded by my Dad for rigging up his terminal to play chess with Brendan. I accidentally lost some important data and my Dad’s been spending all day trying to recover it.”

“So you’re doing community service?” Nora replied with a smirk.
“Yeah, something like that.” He replied.

She didn’t know that much about Liam and knew less about his father Alan, but she figured that they both were some of the more moderate Institute residence. They did their work and kept to themselves. Even in the Directorate meetings that Nora was occasionally invited to, Dr. Binet often acted as the moral compass and voice of reason for the group.

“Well, I hope the rest of your community service goes well.” Nora said politely. “I also hope that your Dad recovers that data. How ‘bout you keep your chess playing to a normal game board from now on?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.” He replied with a good-natured smile. “Goodnight, Mother.”

Nora winced at the title and Liam noticed. “Sorry. I know you hate that name. Goodnight Nora. If you don’t know how to play chess, I’d be glad to teach it to you. Brendan’s still getting the hang of it, but you’re a quick study. I’m sure you’ll catch on quickly.”

“I’ll think about it and let you know.” Nora replied and waved farewell to the young man.

She brought the tray into her room and was about to set it on the table when she felt a piece of paper taped to the underside.

She pulled it off and read the short handwritten note. *I can help you escape here. No Father. No Dr. Ayo. Just Freedom. - L*

Nora held the note to her chest like it was made with solid gold. Hope, a twinge of light to guide her through the tormenting darkness, was a precious gift and Nora knew she owed that kid so much for such a small favor.

Although she had no idea how he planned to do it, nor did she know if it was just a cruel joke, Nora held onto that hope. Suddenly the tasteless Institute food product didn’t taste so bad. It had a slightly sweet tang to it. Now all Nora wanted was a nice glass of whisky before she crawled beneath the starchy covers and waited for sleep to come.
Chapter Notes

There's some polyamorous negotiations ahead, but since I've never been in a poly relationship, I tried to be faithful to all of the forums and information that I read on the matter. I tried to represent both sides fairly without pulling out the love-triangle trope. There will always be slight competition (mostly because I'm a sucker for it), but I’m excited to make the romance a little more equitable from here on out.

Oh, and if you can’t tell, I love chess. I promise that there’s a point to all of the references. (Sorry not sorry for the chess overload).

There’s also a bit of DubCon/NonCon kissing ahead.

Feedback is always appreciated.

Chapter 2: A Game of Chess

Hancock and Nick made it back to Goodneighbor in the early hours of the morning. Magnolia’s music from The Third Rail was in full swing; raucous voices echoed up from the derelict subway station, but instead of indulging in the festivities the two men trudged up to Hancock’s office despondent and defeated.

Hancock flopped onto the chaise and took a long hit of Jet before fishing out a pack of Mentats from his pocket and popping two into his mouth. The berry metallic flavor sent small tingles along his tongue and his gums and he could feel the chems already speeding up his mental faculties. Suddenly answers to previously troubling questions flew through his brain as though they had ridden in on the high itself. He reveled in the intellectual feeling but knew the high wouldn’t last long.

Meanwhile, Nick poured himself three fingers of Hancock’s cheap whisky and drained it in a long, greedy gulp. He fished his cigarettes from his trench coat and was disappointed to find that he was almost out.

Three cigarettes. That was all that was left, but those three were enough for the men to piece together what happened back there.

“God, Nora looks rough.” Nick lamented to the ghoul as he puffed on the first cigarette as he lit it. The stick caught the flame lazily and the synth took a long drag before exhaling the smoke from his nose and out of the torn flesh in his neck. “Did you get a good look at the cybernetics they gave her? They look newer than the kind we pulled outta Kellogg’s head.”

The ghoul nodded and his dark eyes stared out into the abyss. It was as though he could find the answers to his problems in his drug-induced haze. Actually, come to think of it, that’s often where he got his best ideas.

“Yeah,” he rasped, “I think they’re affecting her body as well as her mind. Nora was abnormally fast back there. It was like she’d been training in hand-to-hand combat her entire life. Now, I’ve got
good reflexes -- even when fucking high -- but she seemed to anticipate my moves even before I could do them. Shit, when I first met her, I thought she’d be picking her teeth outta the gutter by the end of the day, but now…”

Hancock didn’t finish his thought, but Nick grinned ruefully at the ghoul as he eyed his swollen lip with a small twinge of satisfaction. “…But now she hates you again. So, I guess you’ve come full circle with her.”

“Nah, I don’t think that was her talking.” He replied, ignoring Nick’s jab. He was willing to put up with the ol’ synth’s sarcasm. He felt he owed it to Nicky in some way. After everything that happened since Nora’s kidnapping, they never exactly buried the hatchet about Hancock kissing his girl. “I think she was purposely pushing us away to protect us, or the Institute could be controlling her mind in some way.”

Nick frowned at the second hypothesis. “This ain’t like some Grognack comic, Hancock.” He admonished, “I don’t think the Institute has progressed far enough to develop sci-fi mind control.”

“So then you think she’s just getting in touch with her closeted xenophobic side?” Hancock replied with slight irritation. Just like that, the Mentats’s effects were gone. Instead he fished his Jet back out and took another hit off that.

Although he tried to let her comment about him being a ‘filthy ghoul’ roll off his back back at Libertalia, now that he had time to meditate on it, he realized that her comment really hurt him. She had never treated him differently because of what he was, so it was a little unnerving to see a good woman like Nora foul herself with petty racism.

“Well, she did say something that I’ve been puzzling over.” Nick commented. He poured himself another three fingers of Hancock’s whisky and sipped it thoughtfully. “She said ‘Father doesn’t give second chances.’ Who do you suppose this Father might be?”

Hancock shook his head and took another hit of Jet. The scene dissolved in front of him and he watched the events unfold anew; it was like a dream was playing behind his eyelids. Nora’s laser pistol was pointed at the synth called Gabriel and her cold voice repeated, You’ve not only betrayed Father, but you’ve hurt innocent people as well. The ghoul’s eyes snapped open and he sat up on the chaise.

“Shit. Fuck.” He rasped. The drug-induced epiphany hit him like an anvil to the head.

"The name ‘Father’ is a title.” His eyes were wide and wild. The high from the Mentats had died quickly, but the residual effects of the drug still helped Hancock jump to a suitable conclusion.

“Come again?” The synth repeated, the raised skin where eyebrows would be was cocked in skepticism and confusion.

“Nora said that Gabriel betrayed Father, and she said that Father doesn’t give second chances. She’s not talking about a real parental-type of figure. It’s a title. It’s like Mayor or President. I bet this Father character is the leader of the Institute.” The ghoul announced proudly.

Nick frowned at the revelation. The logic made sense, he’d give the ghoul that. “So when Nora said that Father doesn’t give second chances, I don’t think she was talking about us.”

Hancock nodded. “I think she was talking about herself. I think her comment was a warning to us. That if we keep dogging her then she’ll be the one in trouble with the Institute’s leader.”

Nick exhaled more smoke. He removed his hat, stretched out his back and ran his hand across the
synthetic plating of his skull. This was beginning to become a delicate situation, he realized. He and Hancock couldn’t use brute force to cow the Institute into giving up Nora. No, they needed to think of a plan that required some finesse.

But the logistics of that plan failed to come to him, and unlike Hancock who wasn’t above a little chem-induced inspiration, Nick was relying only on his detective senses and what his gut was telling him to do.

“We’re in the weeds here, John.” Nick sighed. He needed to change the subject away from the hopeless situation and onto something else. “I dunno what to do.”

Hancock glanced over at the synth. Nicky had rarely called him by his first name. It was always ‘Hancock, you stupid ghoul, or you asshole’ when Nicky was talking about him.

“John, huh?” he chuckled and sauntered over to the synth. He dragged another chair to the small card table that Nick was perched at. “Aside for when you were bleedin’ out in my arms after that shit at Greentech, you haven’t called me by my first name in nearly ten goddammed years, and that precluded a pretty serious heart-to-heart talk that I’ll never fuckin’ forget about.”

Nick frowned at the ghoul. That ‘heart-to-heart’ talk was when Nick was having a serious flashback down in The Third Rail. Magnolia was trying out some new songs on her patrons and one of them happened to be an echo of Pre-War Nick’s life. Well, more specifically, an echo of his late fiancé’s life. Nick lost it right there in The Third Rail and Hancock managed to drag him upstairs into the Old State House before the synth could even unholster his weapon.

That night, Nick told John Hancock, current ghoul Mayor and former Diamond City vagabond, about Jenny.

“This ain’t the same type of conversation.” Nick replied tersely. He wasn’t even sure how he wanted to say what was on his mind. To him, what he was about to say sounded like a surrender. He sounded weak, like he was giving Nora up, but he knew that this is what Nora would’ve wanted even if she could never look Nick in the eye and say it to his face.

The ghoul turned to him and poured himself a glass of the half empty whisky. “Shit Nicky. Just spit it out. You know me. I ain’t the one to judge anyone.”

Nick chuckled but it sounded raspy and harsh on account of starting on his second cigarette. “It’s about Nora and I. It’s about our relationship.”

He sighed and then continued, “Look. I know I should clock you one for kissing her that night. Hell, maybe when this is all over I may just do that, but I also thought about Nora. The kind of woman she is and how I can best support her and what she wants outta this new life. Even when we save her from the Institute, I know that she’ll need all the help she can get dealing with those demons of hers.”

Hancock didn’t understand where Nick was going with this, but he let the synth continue and sipped the burning alcohol.

“Look,” the synth said and his electric eyes bore into Hancock’s, “I know she has feelings for you. I see the way she looks at you, and I’ll admit that I was a little -- no, fuck it -- a lot burned up by it. She’s the first woman that I’ve ever loved. She isn’t some echo of a past life that I can barely remember. She is my present, past, and future all wrapped up into one. I love her John, but I also worry that I may not be enough for her.”
“Nah Nicky, that’s bullshit.” Hancock rumbled and put a consoling hand on Nick’s arm. “You and her are too fuckin’ perfect together, and I’m the asshole for tryin’ to get in between that. When we kissed, she spoke about nothing except how much she knew we were hurting you.”

“But what about how much I am hurting her?” Nick countered. “If she wants to be with you, then I’m keeping her from being truly happy, and now that she’s gone, I would give a lot to do somethings differently.”

The ghoul groaned and stole Nick’s last cigarette from the table and lit it. “Nicky, stop being so god damned insecure. Nora loves you; anyone with eyes can see that.”

Nick agreed, “Yes and that’s why I want to negotiate something with you.”

“Wait, what?”

“I am not giving her up, John. Not in the slightest. I’ll be by her side as long as she’ll have me. But what I propose is that you join me and be by her side as well.”

The ghoul gaped dumbly at the man next to him. He tried to process what Nick had just proposed. Hancock had been around the block plenty of times, sexually speaking, but his serious romantic relationships had always been involved with people monogamously. Nicky wasn’t proposing a threesome or letting Nora “step out” once in a while, he was proposing something far more intimate.

“What yer talking about is a polyamorous relationship?” Hancock clarified. “Shit Nicky, I didn’t think you were the type.”

Nick frowned, “I’ll admit that the idea isn’t my favorite, but it’s more agreeable to me than either giving her up or making her settle for a synth nearly one hundred years out of his warranty.”

“And you think I’m a catch?” Hancock countered with a raspy laugh. “I know you’re a good judge of character and all, but I would shoot the next person like me who dared look at Nora sideways.”

“She trusts you John. She sees something in you that she’s attracted to, and I refuse to stand in the way of that.” Nick replied simply, but then he looked at the ghoul with a harder, serious expression. “I am also trusting you. Hurting her will also hurt me. She isn’t some side fling that you just fuck and then cast aside. She’s vulnerable, and she’ll be even moreso now that the Institute has their claws in her.”

“I know.” The ghoul rasped quietly, almost reverently.

Nick continued, “If we find her. If we get her back. I worry that she’ll need someone a little less like me, a straight laced detective, to heal those wounds. If even half of the rumors about her are true, then she’s already done some pretty questionable things and I’m sure the guilt is suffocating.”

The ghoul looked at the synth and exhaled deeply. “Well shit, Nicky. I don’t know what to say.”

He chuckled and polished off the rest of Hancock’s whisky without bothering to pour it into his tumbler, “You don’t need to say anything yet. First we gotta get our girl outta that hellhole to see what she thinks of this.”

“Agreed.” the ghoul rasped and toasted Nick with his almost empty glass. He gave the ol’ synth a lot of crap, but he really was a helluva good person beneath the plastic skin and metal skeleton.
The next week passed by in the Institute with agonizing slowness. When Nora wasn’t on missions for the Institute, her days were often free and unstructured. She didn’t have the scientific understanding to assist anyone with their experiments, her son was often too busy to even see Nora outside of his normally scheduled meal times, and the Gen-3 synths would get too distracted by her presence that she was finally asked to just keep to her room when not working with Ayo and the other coursers.

She could only sleep and lounge around so much before her mind began to wander back to the people she was missing back home in Diamond City. Ellie, Arturo, Travis, Yefim, Vadim, and hell, she even missed Piper’s endless prattling. In fact, she felt kind of guilty about how they left things back in Diamond City. Sure, Piper’s nosy questions about her and Nick’s relationship were inappropriate, but Nora knew that she didn’t mean anything by it.

Nora also wondered how Preston and his gang from Quincy were doing back at Sanctuary. Although she couldn’t be the leader that he wanted, she sincerely hoped that he found someone to step up and help out the Minutemen. Their cause was noble, and unlike The Railroad, their cause was as pure as they came -- help others and they’ll return the favor.

Just then, she heard a quiet knock on her door and rose up from her spot on the floor to grab it. At first, she braced herself for the worst. Ayo usually didn’t drop by to torment Nora until he got done with his work, but the clock in Nora’s room read that it was half past three in the afternoon. Nevertheless, Nora steeled herself and opened the door.

“Hey Nora.” Liam greeted with a friendly smile. He had a white messenger bag around his shoulders that looked full to the brim with assorted things.

“Afternoon, Liam.” Nora replied politely. When she received the note taped to the underside of her tray, Nora wondered if this was all a cruel joke. She assumed -- and hoped -- that Liam would eventually explain himself.

“I was wondering if you’d like to play chess with me.” He replied and opened his messenger bag to show her a chessboard tucked among some books, memo pads, and scientific instruments.

“I won’t be getting you in trouble, will I?” Nora asked cautiously. “Are you still grounded?”

Liam looked sheepish. “Yeah I am, but most of that is that I’m not allowed to touch a terminal until I can use one appropriately. Normal scavenged chessboards, on the other hand, are not a condition of my parole.”

Nora chuckled and replied, “Alright. I should warn you, though. I’m terrible at most board games.”

“That’s okay.” He replied. “I’ll teach you.”

She wouldn’t have cared even if he pulled out Blast Radius from his bag. Nora was just grateful to have something interesting to do.

Nora sat across Liam in the common area as he pulled a worn chessboard from his messenger bag and placed it on the table in front of them. He then spilled out small black and white plastic pieces and began setting up the board.

“See, chess is a super easy game to understand.” He began explaining while Nora watched him assemble a row of oblong tear-drop like pieces which she later learned were called Pawns. “The objective of the game is to capture your opponent’s King.”

Liam held up two identical pieces, one in black and one in white, that were slightly taller tear-drop
pieces adorned with stately crowns. "The rest of the pieces, which we’ll get into in a moment, are suppose to protect the King. See, he’s the weakest piece because he can only move one space in any direction, but he’s the most important.”

The young man went on to explain the other pieces and how the game started. “Since you’re new, I’ll let you be white. That means you start first.”

Nora followed Liam’s guide and moved her first Pawn forward two spaces. Likewise Liam would counter with his own moves. He was a good teacher, Nora thought, and she appreciated that he didn’t take advantage of her ignorance just to show off his skill. Several times he’d give her a wry grin when she was about to move a piece and then she’d realize that in the next two or three moves, that would leave her King open.

“Liam, I thought you said this was an easy game.” She lamented after his Knight took her last Bishop.

“Check.” He replied and then chuckled at Nora’s frustrated expression. “I said this was an easy game to understand, I didn’t say it was easy to play. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices. See, if you move your Rook over to take your King out of check, and then if I made a blunder and thought taking the Rook would be an easy reward, then your Queen could swoop in here and take my Knight.”

Nora’s head swam from what he had just said. “How do you know what your opponent is going to do? I can’t read your mind.”

“No,” Liam agreed and moved his own Bishop across the board. Her King was stuck in between her Queen and a Pawn that she never had the opportunity to use. “But you see, people are predictable. Most people work for short term gain without thinking about the long term consequences.”

Nora looked at her trapped King and saw that she had no viable moves left.

“Check Mate.” Liam smirked.

Nora smiled and bowed her head in a mock concession, “Alright, you win. You are too good at this game Liam.”

He grinned and then swept the black pieces into a small bag. Nora made a move to help him gather up her white pieces but his hands gently brushed hers away.

“Don’t worry, I got it.” he replied. “But first, how ‘bout a little pop quiz.”

Liam put the six different pieces on their side in order of their importance from King to Pawn. On the bottoms of each piece, Nora saw that a letter was etched into each different piece. When laid out, the six letter message read: T-R-U-S-T-?

Nora gaped at the message and then looked at Liam warily. “I don’t know” She whispered.

“Aw c’mon, it’ll be easy.” he responded with ease. “I just want to check your understanding of the game.”

He was answering her question without tipping off Ayo’s lackeys who were listening in to their game via her cybernetic implant. *Holy shit, that’s clever. Nora thought.*

“Okay, fine.” She replied
“Great! So what’s the point of the King?” Liam recapped.

“He’s the weakest piece on the board, but he’s the most important. If your opponent captures the King, the game is over.” Nora replied quickly.

“Good, and the Queen?” He replied.

“The Queen is the most powerful piece on the board, but she’s usually the first your opponent will go after because of her threat to the other pieces.”

“Yeah that’s mostly true. Remember, humans are predictable. We can assume that until we can’t.” Liam cautioned, “And the Bishops?”

“The Bishops are important because they need to work together to corner the King. That’s why one Bishop remains on the white square and the other on the black; when separated, they have a very obvious weakness, but when they work together they can be a force to be reckoned with.”

Nora thought of Hancock and Nick and how they had set aside their differences so they could devise a plan to save her. Nick’s honor and insecurities balanced Hancock’s bravery and impulsivity. They were two of the same kinds of men who would stop at nothing in protecting their Queen.

“And the Rook?” Liam continued, pleased that his student was putting together their real-life chess game in her head.

“Like the Bishops, they can work together but it’s often suggested to use them as protection for the King instead of an offensive force.” Nora recounted.

“And lastly, the meager Pawn.”

Nora paused. The Pawn who was on the front lines. The Pawn who was often sacrificed in the name of progress. The Pawn who could be a great liability or a great hero depending on how it was wielded. “I’d argue that the Pawn is one of the more important pieces in the game.”

“Oh, and why’s that?”

“Because if you can manage to get your Pawn to the other side of the board, you can upgrade it to a Queen. It’s a risky strategy, but it can have a substantial payoff too.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Liam replied cheerfully. “So how was that? D’you think you’d want to play against me again sometime?”

“I think that would be fine.” Nora replied neutrally. She didn’t understand what he was playing at here. Secret messages taped to her dinner tray and engraved onto the bottom of chess pieces? What was this kid’s deal? Did he get cheap thrills in playing the secret agent while living in the Institute?

“Great!” he replied. Here you can borrow my board. I have a spare one back in my room. This way you can practice so you’ll be ready when we play each other next time.”

“Thanks Liam, that’s very nice of you.”

The young man brushed off her compliment with an embarrassed shrug of his shoulders. “Don’t mention it. Now I gotta get going. I’m on food serving duty again. Since I can’t play around on Dad’s computer, I have to do something to pass the time. See you later, Nora!”
Nora watched Liam walk through the opposite sliding doors and take the elevator down to the Atrium. Nobody seemed to notice him; synths and scientists alike made little to no eye contact and even fewer people greeted him as he walked through the archway that led to the cafeterias.

She brought the chess board into her bedroom and sat it on the table. The pieces they played with sat on top in a plastic baggie. Nora inspected the chessboard carefully. She almost expected to find another secret message etched into the dark wood. What she found instead were two small silver hinges on one end of the board.

Nora carefully cracked the board open and she heard the small hinges screech in protest. Inside the chessboard was a single note written on a yellow legal pad. She took the note out, went into the bathroom, and shut the door to read it.

You have no reason to trust me, but please know that I don’t want to hurt you. I haven’t been blinded by the Institute’s false promises for the future. I’ve spent the past eighteen months smuggling synths topside. Your friends, at least I think they’re your friends, then take them and set them free into their new lives. Nobody knows my identity except you. If you ever wish to escape, I can make some arrangements to get you topside for good. No courser chip, no cybernetics, no Dr. Ayo. Just freedom. If you are interested, order the Product #13 from the cafeteria. The Gen-2 synth working there has been reprogramed to accept it as a codeword. He’ll notify me immediately.

-- L

PS. Destroy this note and the one I gave you earlier. We can’t leave a paper trail.

Nora crumpled the note and then flushed it down the toilet. Her hands were shaking, partially from excitement, but also partially from fear. Could she really betray Father and take Liam up on his offer? She’d be free from Dr. Ayo, she’d be free out under the thumb of the Institute, but she’d have to abandon her son all over again.

Just before eight that evening, the doorbell chimed again. The sickening sense of dread once more pulled through Nora’s guts.

“Good evening, Mother.” Ayo replied when Nora opened the door. He had changed out of his blue laboratory jumpsuit and was wearing loose fitting doctor’s scrubs and a plain grey t-shirt.

“Do you need something, Dr. Ayo?” Nora replied coldly. She tried to sound bored but her thundering heart gave her voice a nervous edge.

“Yes, I do.” He replied and invited himself into the room. The door slid shut behind him and Nora felt like a caged beast. The tom cat had breached the bird’s cage and he was hungry. “I am here to deliver your next assignment. You leave tomorrow morning with X6.”

“Then can’t the briefing wait until tomorrow? I’m about to eat dinner in the cafeteria.” Nora tried to move past him but he stepped in her way. The minty smell of his toothpaste was even stronger than usual.

“I took the liberty of having our dinner brought up here. We have much to discuss about tomorrow’s little adventure. I even smuggled you some wine.” Ayo pulled a dark bottle out from behind his back, the label had long since peeled off.

“I’m not allowed to drink wine.” She replied coolly. “Father’s orders and all.”

While chem use had been long outlawed in the Institute, recreational drinking was much more difficult to combat. The scientists would sometimes enjoy a beer or a stiff whisky after a long day
of experimentation, but Nora was forced to abstain. Father claimed it was because her responsibility as a courser required her to have a clear head, but he was really more concerned that her bad habits that she picked up topside -- most notably her smoking and drinking -- would tarnish his sterling reputation.

“Surely what Father doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” Ayo replied and brushed past Nora. He grabbed two coffee cups and uncorked the bottle with a small pocketknife. He poured the red liquid into the pristine ceramic mugs and handed Nora one.

She looked at the cup of wine pointedly and with obvious distaste, but she still took it. “If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you were trying to get me drunk.”

Ayo approached her like a cat slinking through the grass. He moved slowly but with purpose. When he was near enough to Nora, he clinked his mug with hers and smirked.

“As I said when I met you four months ago, you are not my type. But, we’ve had a pretty rocky beginning in our relationship, and I wanted to start smoothing out some of the kinks.” His voice was even and smoky. Nora heard that same voice on drunk men at the bar when it was close to closing time and when good sense had long ago taken leave from their alcohol soaked brains.

Nora took a sip of the wine. It was overly sweet, and cloying on her tongue and it burned her throat when she swallowed it.

“How do you like it?” Ayo asked. His hungry eyes pierced hers as she took another cautious sip.

“It’s alright.” She replied nonchalantly, “I’m more of a fan of white wine, though.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He replied and took a seat at the small table. Liam’s chessboard sat on the edge and Ayo looked at it with mock admiration.

“A fan of chess I see? I’m so glad that Liam was able to teach you the basics. I’m quite the chess player myself.” Nora had to bite her tongue to keep her eyes from rolling around at his self-aggrandizing tone.

“Maybe you should challenge Liam to a little game.” Nora suggested, “He’s quite good.”

“I think I’d rather challenge you.” He replied and began pulling the pieces out of the bag. Nora panicked when she saw Ayo grab the white Queen. The inscribed letter “R” was just visible beneath the bright fluorescent lights. If he saw Liam’s message inscribed message, they’d both be in serious trouble.

“Alright, but I get to be white!” Nora replied quickly and sat opposite of Ayo.

The man smirked at her eagerness. He chalked it up to a minor victory, and let Nora set up her white pieces on her own.

Nora started moved her Pawn forward and freshened Ayo’s mug with more wine.

“Now who’s trying to whom drunk?” He replied smirking but drank from his cup nonetheless.

“I’ll need every advantage I can get. I only learned the game today.” She replied with a fake smile.

Nora was treading dangerous waters. She needed the game to end quickly, partially so Ayo would leave her alone, but also because the message inscribed beneath her pieces could be the ruin of everything. She felt like they were playing atop a ticking land mine.
“So, what is this mission that I need to go on tomorrow?” She asked banally and moved her Knight towards the middle and captured his Pawn.

Ayo moved his own Pawn forward and then sat back in the chair lazily. “It’s a rather sensitive mission, but I promise that the reward for its completion will be to your liking.”

Nora tried to feign disinterest but failed. “And what’s the mission?”

“You are ordered to eliminate a target that the Institute deems is a security risk. The task should be easy since you’ve already met him.” Ayo said smugly. “Of course, I am making a deduction here since my Watchers cannot survive in that infernal hell hole that you call The Glowing Sea.”

Virgil. Nora thought. She would be sent to kill Brian Virgil.

“Ah, I can see from your face that you already know who your target is. That will make tomorrow’s discussion with X6 a lot shorter.” Ayo took her Knight with his Queen. He moved the token with a bit too much flourish and the white piece tumbled onto the ground. Nora’s hand immediately grabbed it before he could see the other letter inscribed on the bottom, but then Ayo’s hand touched her own.

He brought her hand, still clenching the piece tightly in her fist, up to the table and let his cold fingers trail around her wrist.

Nora clenched her jaw in protest but said nothing. There were no words that would keep her from ruining her position as a courser while stopping Ayo’s inappropriate advances.

She rose unsteadily from the table, pocketed the chess piece, and grabbed the bottle of wine. She freshened her glass, but when she went to freshen the other, Ayo’s steel grey eyes and his parted lips were inches away from her face.

“Why do you let those abominations fuck you, Nora?” He whispered harshly. Their chess game forgotten. His hand grasped her wrist again, but his touch was rougher and more domineering. “Why debase your body when you could have someone so much better?”

Nora firmly pulled her hand from his grasp and took a step away from him.

“I’ve -- I -- I think I’ve had too much wine for now.” She stammered out and put the bottle on the chess board. “You should probably go, too.”

He sneered and raised his hand. Nora flinched expecting him to hit her, but his hand grabbed the base of her head harshly and pulled her into him. His kiss was wet and sloppy. It had too much tongue and her teeth clicked against his so hard that she felt tingling pain travel through her gums and down into her spine. For his slight build, Ayo was forceful but not physical, yet Nora felt trapped by the situation. She could’ve easily punched him or fought back, but she was paralyzed by his authority over her. She felt helpless and numb.

He groaned deeply, his thin mustache felt like sandpaper on Nora’s skin. She broke the kiss and put one hand on his chest to stop him. She fought the nausea and the headache that were fighting for dominance and she finally mustered up the courage to speak.

“Stop. Please stop.” Her voice sounded small. Hell, although no wilting flower herself, Nora felt inadequate and powerless.

Ayo smirked but he stepped away. The erection in his pants tented obscenely through the loose-
fitting fabric leaving nothing to the imagination.

“I thought you said I wasn’t your type.” Nora whispered. She didn’t trust her voice to be any louder.

“You don’t have to be my type for me to fuck you.” He sneered. “After all, you let those abominations do it. Why would I be any different?”

He looked wistfully at the clock that now read half past nine in the evening. "But unfortunately, I do not have time for that right now."

Ayo drank both mugs of wine greedily and then put the cork back into the large bottle that was on the chess board. He wiped his lips and mustache boorishly with the back of his hand and took a few calming breaths. It looked as though he was trying to meditate his hard-on away.

Nora would’ve laughed if she wasn’t terrified. She was rooted to the spot, standing awkwardly with her arms across her chest, waiting for Ayo to take his leave.

Ayo sighed out and then turned to Nora. “Be downstairs in the SRB no later than eight in the morning, and say nothing about your mission to anyone. It is highly classified.”

Nora nodded mutely and watched as Ayo frowned at their unfinished game.

“I will take a raincheck on our chess game, Mother. It was fun while it lasted.” He replied.

Nora watched Ayo leave and saw that he had left her the half empty bottle of wine. She snatched the offending alcohol off the table and moved to pour it down the sink, but then a little voice changed her mind.

She took the bottle and stuck it behind the heavy computer desk in the living room. It could be seen from the bathroom doorway, but was hidden from anyone who would try to look in on her.

*Just a few more pills and you can make this end.* The dark voice said. This was the same voice that enticed her to end it outside of Vault 111 and the same one that plagued her thoughts and fed her insecurities and lies when Shaun was born. Nora hated to admit it, but she missed the voice like she missed an old friend.

Nora’s hand trembled as she typed in the code on the wall’s panel to call the cafeteria. The other part of her mind -- the one that valued self-preservation -- screamed at her to get ahold of Liam. He was her only hope in making it out of the Institute alive. Her resiliency was waning: with fighting Ayo, the guilt of her past deeds, the anxiety about her future missions, and her loneliness, Nora was feeling pulled and stretched in too many ways.

“Can I help you, Mother?” The robotic Gen-2 synth voice asked.

“C-can I get the Product #13?”

“T- I’m sorry, Mother. We are out of that product.”

His cool reply dashed Nora’s hopes. She hung up on the Gen-2 synth and trudged over to the bathroom.

The nausea from the cheap wine and from Ayo’s advances churned into a tempest and Nora collapsed onto her knees and heaved into the toilet bowl. She couldn’t stop. Blood vessels broke beneath her skin from the violent expulsion of her stomach’s contents. She placed her inflamed
cheek on the bathroom tile flooring and imagined she was back in Diamond City.

Hancock passed her a tumbler of whisky and lit her cigarette. Vadim was carrying on with a highly embellished story about how Travis and Nora had saved him from the Raiders while Piper listened with appropriate mirth and skepticism. Nick’s cool, synthetic hand caressed her ruddy cheeks and brushed away the tears that leaked from her eyes.

There Nora fell asleep, entwined in a fantasy world in which she never wanted to leave.
For Whom the Bell Tolls

Chapter Notes

This is a pretty bleak chapter. I threw in a little Hancock/FSole fluff just to give us a light at the end of the tunnel to look towards. I will try to get the next chapter up quickly so as to not leave you all hanging.

Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to leave kudos or reviews. I appreciate it!

Chapter 3 -- For Whom The Bell Tolls

Nora awoke with a pounding headache and the foul taste of bile in her throat. She squeezed her eyes closed until her headache abated. When her fingertips trailed across the coarse sheets on her bed, she jolted upright in a panic. Someone had moved her while she slept.

Thick, cold tendrils of fear crept around to the back of her neck. Her hair stood on end like an animal’s raised hackles. Maybe Ayo had come back during the night to satisfy his lust while Nora was blissfully passed out from stress-induced exhaustion. The simple thought of that made her queasy all over again.

She reached under the covers to check that her clothes were still intact. They were. She also didn’t feel the peculiar ache or soreness that sometimes accompanied sex, nor was there any evidence that something went terribly wrong -- aside for her pounding headache. She wasn’t hung over; hell, she had maybe one glass total of that awful wine, but she still felt out of sorts.

“Nora, are you awake?” A voice asked. The voice seemed impatient and it’s tone was short and clipped.

She groaned at the sound of the person’s voice. Her temple throbbed and the cybernetic in the side of her face felt itchy. In fact, the entire air around her felt electrically-charged in some way. It reminded Nora of childhood when she dragged sock-covered feet along the carpet to build up static electricity. When she touched another object (or person), her finger tickled every so minutely as the electric discharged from her skin. Now the feeling was amplified nearly one hundred fold

“Relax.” A sharp voice admonished when her tentative hand tried to feel the cybernetic. “And don’t touch that. You’ll get a nasty shock which could then re-start the system and render the cybernetic ineffective.”

Gee, wouldn’t that be a shame, she thought. If it wasn’t for Ayo’s expectation that he be in contact with her at all times when she went topside, Nora would’ve already torn the infernal implant right out of her head. Yet, like it or not, all of the Institute tech in her body was a small price to pay for an ounce of freedom.

Nora groaned and opened her eyes. Dr. Li sat on the edge of her bed. Her greying hair was pulled up into a severe bun and her hawkish eyes scrutinized her with thinly-veiled disapproval.

“What did you do to me?” Nora whispered hoarsely. “What did you put in this room? My head feels like it’ll split in two.”
“Nothing.” The woman snipped as though she was annoyed by the question. Then she sighed in resignation. “Sorry, I mean, it’s nothing to worry about. It’s a pulse emitter that sends out a temporary low power EMP field. My colleagues and I created it last year after we had finished our work on the cybernetic enhancements. The device emits a electromagnetic field that scrambles technology nearby, including the tech that allows Dr. Ayo to listen in to your conversations.”

Nora narrowed her eyes suspiciously at the woman. After all, Dr. Li assisted with the surgery to install the implant. She made the necessary modifications, per Ayo’s instructions, to include improved perception and heightened cognitive processing. Even when it meant excruciating pain during the operation, Dr. Li also tweaked the tech to dull her pain receptors. Why was she trying to defy Ayo now?

“Why are you here?” Nora croaked out and sat up. The lights in the room were dimmed to their nighttime settings; the digital clock above the terminal said that it was a little past six-thirty in the morning. “Why are you trying to prevent Ayo from hearing this?”

“I’m here to warn you, Nora.” Dr. Li replied quietly. Her voice was a hushed whisper as though the walls themselves could pick up on their conversation. “You should’ve never given in to Ayo’s demands. Going topside in exchange for your very soul is not a fair trade if you ask me.”

“Well nobody asked you.” She snapped.

Dr. Li sighed impatiently at Nora’s ire. This wasn’t how she wanted their conversation to begin. “Look. I’m sorry. Let’s start over. I need your help, Nora.”

“With what exactly?” She replied suspiciously.

Dr. Li looked nervous. Her sharp eyes flitted over to the doorway like a trapped animal looking for an escape. The last time she trusted a stranger to help her, he completely surpassed her expectations. She could only hope that Nora would do the same.

“Ayo is going to send you after my former colleague, Dr. Brian Virgil. Several coursers, including Kellogg, have already been sent topside to eliminate him, but all of them have failed. You are the only person who has ever been in direct contact with Dr. Virgil since he left the Institute, and so you know how precarious his situation is. I need you to fake his death. If you follow my plan, you won’t have to kill him, and the Institute will think that you’ve eliminated a high profile target.”

“Why do you care so much about him?” Nora asked. “He’s a traitor. He left the Institute. He betrayed Father...”

Nora didn’t bother continuing when Dr. Li’s face darkened into a sneer.

“Do you really think I blindly follow Shaun’s dogmatic obsession about the Institute? This place is indeed a scientific mecca but it is hardly the utopia that he wants it to be. Dr. Virgil saw that and he left. I’m starting to see that too. Don’t treat me like I’m one of the brainwashed among the masses. I’m just as much a prisoner here as you are.”

Dr. Li looked around nervously as though the very act of admitting the Institute's fallibility was enough to damn her. Nora wondered if she had Dr. Li pegged all wrong.

Nora responded carefully. “If you don’t think Dr. Virgil’s a traitor, then isn’t he better off where he’s hiding?”

“He may stay hiding for a while, but eventually, the pull of his work will become too strong and he’ll leave. Unlike last time, I hope to be a more active part in saving his life.”
“Unlike last time?” Nora repeated. “He’s escaped the Institute before?”

“No. No.” Dr. Li dismissed Nora’s confusion with a brisk wave, but a forlorn look crept behind her steel eyes, “That was someone else. It’s just that history tends to repeat itself. I don’t want Virgil to befall the same fate as ...” she cleared her throat and shook off the melancholy, “Will you help him?”

Nora considered her request and remembered the conversation that she had with Virgil back when she and Hancock had nearly risked life and limb to find his hidden cave. The scientist-turned-Super Mutant had asked her to find his serum to counteract the FEV virus. Yet, in the four months of her imprisonment here, Nora hadn’t lifted a finger to search for it. In truth, she figured that she’d never see him again and decided to cut that responsibility from her already mounting plate of worries. But now that her life intersected his again, she had the good sense to feel ashamed.

“I don’t know how I am suppose to save him.” Nora confessed. “I hate to admit this, but I don’t think there’s hope for him. He injected himself with one of the FEV samples and he’s turned into a Super Mutant. He was intelligent and still had his human mind, but I don’t think he can withstand the virus for that long.”

“I know.” She agreed. “Dr. Virgil and I have been corresponding via a private server. He hasn’t been able to fill me in on much. But, he was worried that you would fail to follow through with finding the serum, so he had me do it instead. But as of two months ago, I haven’t recieved any more messages from him.”

Nora’s face burned, partially from embarrassment but also from shame. “Look, I didn’t mean to blow him off. I’ve been --”

“You’ve been busy being bullied by Ayo just like the rest of us. I know.” Dr. Li replied. This time her tone wasn’t dismissive or icy. She sounded almost sorry for Nora. It was as though she knew what it was like to be used and coerced into being obedient.

“But that’s neither here nor there.” She replied uncomfortably, “I have something that I think will help you accomplish your mission.”

Dr. Li pulled something out from a plastic bag. It looked like a standard laser pistol, but Nora saw that the muzzle was much larger. The gun looked exactly like the one that the Institute had issued her when she became a courser.

“I’ve modified a standard laser rifle to fire syringes. It looks exactly like your normal gun, but this is loaded with the serum that he was working on.”

She showed Nora the open cartridge. A small vial was attached to a hypodermic needle. The serum was a dark amber color and then Dr. Li handed her a small ammo box that had three more identical syringes.

“You’ll only need to shoot him with one of these.” Dr. Li instructed. “But I’m no fool and I know not to leave his fate up to the chance of just one syringe, so I’ve used all of his remaining serum to create alternates in case there’s a serious mishap or emergency.”

Nora looked at the gun and considered the proposition. This could possibly work, Nora thought. Ayo and his coursers never checked Nora’s bag upon leaving the Institute. They assumed that she would pick up contraband in the wasteland and try to smuggle it in, not vice versa. Yet, there was one flaw in her plan.
“What about X6? He’s gone topside with me on every mission. How am I suppose to do this without him seeing that my gun is actually a syringe-shooting pistol in disguise?”

Dr. Li looked guilty and brushed away a piece of invisible lint from her Institute jumpsuit. “As you know, any Gen-3 can be shut down by activating a recall code. Gen-3s can also be reprogrammed to believe they’re someone they’re not with a minor tweak to their synth component. I paid someone off in the SRB to temporarily reprogram X6.”

Nora was floored by Dr. Li’s confession. “Who did you pay off?”

“Never mind that.” She snapped. “All you need to know is that X6 will be out of commission for a few days thanks to a few tricks that I picked up from a colleague back in the Capitol Wasteland.”

Even more questions flew to Nora’s mind about Dr. Li’s colleague and about living in the Capitol Wasteland, but she had the good sense to not ask them. She knew the reticent woman wouldn’t answer her questions anyway.

“How do I know that I can trust you?” Nora asked.

Dr. Li seemed surprised by her question, but a small smile pulled at her lips. “Consider this an exchange. If you help him, then I’ll help you. If you fake Dr. Virgil’s death convincingly, then Ayo will talk with Father and he’ll let you go topside for a while unsupervised. When that happens, I will temporarily disable the part of the tech that relays your conversations back to the SRB. You’ll get your wish. You’ll have a temporary moment of complete freedom.”

Nora’s eyes widened at the prospect. She couldn’t speak. The shock and the anticipation was too great.

“But first,” Dr. Li continued. “We need to start planting this seed of credibility now. When I deactivate the EMP field, you need to play along. Be convincing. Everything hinges on this.”

Dr. Li grabbed the small device and flipped a switch on the side. Immediately, the electrified current that filled the room ceased. The air felt clearer and Nora’s headache stopped.

“Mother, are you awake?” Dr. Li asked briskly?

“Yes.” She replied. She gave Dr. Li a confused look and she returned the look with a hard stare.

“My terminal has picked up an irregularity with your cybernetic. I came to check on you. How are you feeling?”

Dr. Li moved closer to Nora so she sat right next to her upright body. The rustle of the bed and the proximity of the doctor’s voice was the first act of their ruse.

“I had a headache and it woke me up.” Nora replied. “But otherwise I’m feeling fine.”

“Hmm. Then it should be nothing. Just hold on.” Dr. Li’s thin fingers gently touched the cybernetic without doing anything substantial.

“There, I think we’ve got it.” She commented with a smirk. “Just be sure to check in with Dr. Ayo to make sure it’s all clear on his end. Who knows, we may need to upgrade the software.”

“Okay.” Nora replied. She watched Dr. Li pocket the EMP device and crumple up the canvas bag that she used to carry the decoy laser pistol. The woman left quickly and without another word to Nora.
Once the door slid shut, she threw off the covers and stuffed the gun into the messenger bag by her desk. This bag was nearly identical to her old bag that she bought from Fallon’s in Diamond City, except this bag was grey and it had faded black lettering that said CIT ALUMNI on the side.

Nora had a little more than an hour before she had to report to Dr. Ayo for her mission. Going back to sleep was out of the question, so she stripped out of her sleeping clothes and stepped into the shower. She washed quickly and let the cool water wake her up.

Nora thought about Ayo’s encounter with her last night. The revulsion and the shame she felt from their encounter still sat below her skin like a poison. She felt violated with one kiss. She felt that he had taken all of her control and agency and that really bothered her. If she was forced to act as an Institute’s courser, if she had to sell her very body and mind to the Institute in exchange for swallows of freedom, then Nora demanded that she keep something for herself.

Ayo might take her body. He might force her to submit to his will via threats, coercion, and rape, but Nora would never allow him to break her.

She thought about the mission ahead of her. If she did this right, then she felt confident that she could also ask for a brief sabbatical topside. A week would be ideal but even a day or two would be enough to shake the perpetual gloom and melancholy that she felt when she wasn’t extracting justice on the Institute’s behalf. And if she did what Dr. Li asked, she could even spend some of that time completely free. Her tethers to the Institute were beginning to stretch; now all Nora needed to do was lunge forward when the opportunity struck to break the tethers completely.

An hour later, Nora was dressed and stood down in the SRB with her arms and legs spread so that a synth worker could outfit her with armor.

“Do you understand your assignment, Mother?” Ayo drawled. He had bags under his eyes and didn’t shave that morning. His pencil-thin mustache now blended in to the salt-and-pepper stubble on his face. A mug of black coffee sat on his desk, and Nora eyed it greedily. Where in the world did he get coffee from, she wondered.

“Oh, wonder where he got his coffee from?”

“Hey,” He chided. “Pay attention here.”

She tore her eyes away from the dark liquid and forced herself to look into Ayo’s weasel-like face.

“You will be going alone.” He barked authoritatively and Nora feigned a look of surprise at his announcement.

“X6 isn’t coming with me?” She replied lightly.

“No. He is away on another mission for us. Father determined that it was a mission that took precedent to this one and he left early this morning.”

Nora bit her tongue painfully to keep herself from smirking at Ayo’s bold-faced lie. For all Nora knew, X6 had been reprogramed to think he was the Silver Shroud and he was cavorting around the Institute barracks catching ‘evil-doers’ and looking for his own Mistress of Mystery.

Ayo seemed to see the slight mirth in Nora’s eyes and frowned. “But don’t think that you can pull anything funny. We are still listening closely on your activities topside. Consider this a test. If you can succeed in this mission without a chaperone, then perhaps X6 will no longer be needed to accompany you on future missions.”

Again, the carrot was dangled at the end of the stick. She just hoped they’d follow through on their end of the bargain when the time came to pay up.
“Do you understand your assignment?” Ayo asked. He was close to Nora, far too close for her to be comfortable, but she couldn’t take a step back without tripping over the two synths who were lacing up and adjusting her armor.

“Yes I understand my assignment.” She replied tersely. Ayo’s eyes were fixed on her breasts as though he could see through the thick layer of synthetic polymer armor and the three layers of clothing that she wore beneath it. “You want me to relay to Virgil’s cave and execute him. It’s hardly a complicated mission.”

“Don’t be cocky.” He sneered. His eyes finally snapped back to Nora’s. “The FEV program was a huge undertaking for the Institute. By it’s very nature, FEV mutates the body as well as the mind. Virgil was a brilliant scientist, but he was prone to irrational behavior. That behavior could have augmented to his mutated self which makes him unpredictable.”

“Are you really concerned for my well-being, Ayo?” Nora replied huffily. “Or are you issuing Father’s mandatory disclaimer so you can check that off from your ‘list of things to tell Nora so you can kiss up to him a little more.’”

His chin jutted towards her and he scowled. She hit a sore spot and she knew it.

“Non-essential personnel leave the premises now.” He snapped. Five Gen-3s left quickly and quietly -- including the ones that were fastening her armor -- while the remainder of the scientists sat motionless. None of them looked at Nora or Ayo. Their eyes were either on their computer terminals or were cast subserviently downwards.

“Please apologize.” He replied. His voice was dangerously quiet. Nora could hear the implied ‘or else’ at the end of his request. As though to punctuate his point, Ayo walked closer to Nora and stood toe to toe with her. Now she really couldn’t back down so she decided to go on the attack.

“Apologize for what?”

“For being disrespectful.” He hissed.

Nora smirked. She had an audience now. She had the perp on the witness stand and she had the prime evidence to use against him. “I was no more disrespectful than you last night. Most people would agree,” She glanced around at her captive and quiet audience, “that sexual assault is way more disrespectful than my flippant comments. So, how ‘bout you apologize first and then I will. We can let bygones be bygones and then we can get rolling on this assassination mission.”

Ayo was now inches away from Nora’s face. She could now smell the bitterly energizing aroma of the coffee on his breath.

“Coercion wont work on me, Nora.” he growled. “These workers signed an agreement when they came to work with me that they wouldn’t divulge the activities going on in my lab -- whether of a personal nature or not. Don’t make me regret putting you on missions topside. Your little jibes and insults may seem funny to you, but I hold your freedom and your life in the palm of my hands.”

“It’s a shame that my life is worth so little; they’re awfully small hands” Nora muttered quickly.

Ayo’s hand cracked across her left cheek like the sound of a whip. Nora’s face jerked sideways from the impact. Her cheek stung and her skin felt hot but she refused to let him get to her. Not this time, at least.

He rose his hand to strike Nora again when a sharp voice cut through the tense silence. “THAT’S ENOUGH.”
There was only one person in the Institute who could make Ayo retreat as quickly as he did. Although she couldn’t see Father, she felt the weight of his heavy palm on her shoulder. Father’s measured glare seemed to singe everyone in the room, including Ayo. He mumbled an apology for getting too carried away and scurried back to this console like a frightened mouse.

Without removing his hand, Father came around to Nora’s front and offered her a small but warm smile.

“I will apologize for Ayo, Mother, since he seems incapable of acting like a civilized human being right now.”

Nora could see Ayo’s back heaving as he seethed with rage. She couldn’t let him ruin her chances to go topside just because he was a royal jackass.

“I apologize too.” Nora insisted. “I goaded him on. I was being disrespectful and I’m sorry.

Father patted her arm like a parent would to a toddler who was apologizing under duress. He knew the apology wasn’t sincere, but he appreciated Nora’s obedience nonetheless.

He guided her over to the relay platform while a scientist handed her the grey Institute messenger bag which held both of her guns and some minor supplies. If the extra five pounds of weight seemed suspicious, the scientist didn’t say anything about it.

“Nora, this mission is of our utmost importance. You will be going into terrible danger. I cannot have you distracted by your anger or rage.” Then Father leaned closer to Nora and she could see the slight bags under his eyes and the age spots that marred his pale skin, “You and Dr. Ayo may have your differences, but I ask that they don’t interfere with your work. You’ve done great work for me, Mother. This mission is just one more important feat in accomplishing the Institute’s goals.”

Nora bit her tongue again. This time it was to stop herself from demanding how killing Virgil would be accomplishing the Institute’s goal. All she could do was nod, but that seemed to be enough for Father who then smiled grimly and then placed both large hands onto her shoulders.

“Be safe, Mother.” He said quietly before stepping off the relay platform and giving the signal to a nearby scientist to flip the relay switch.

Bright blue light swirled around her briefly and then she felt the hot, sticky air and saw the yellow-tinged sky. She was back in the Glowing Sea and Virgil’s cave sat right in front of her.

Nora entered the cool cave. The acrid smoke of burning electronics and oil made her eyes water. As she walked farther into the cave she discovered that Virgil’s turrets had been smashed into pieces.

“Dr. Virgil?” She called out cautiously. Dr. Li’s modified laser rife was at her side and her own Institute pistol was holstered on her left hip.

As she crept farther, she saw the yellow construction Protectron that once patrolled the mouth of the tunnel. Now it sat sparking on its side. Its legs had been ripped out of it’s body and the robot was beeping occasionally from it’s face-like monitor.

“STOOPID ROBOT!” A voice roared from around the corner. “GO BACK TOGETHER!”

The yellow construction lights were knocked over and their floodlight illuminated the cave walls at
an odd angle. The assorted scientific instruments and supplies were broken and strewn about the earthen floor. Glass crackled beneath Nora’s reinforced feet, and then Nora smelled the sweet, pungently nauseating odor of cooked human flesh.

Next to her, on a makeshift grill, was the remains of a man whose face was filthy with grime and dirt. He was impaled on a large metal skewer and his face was contorted into an inhuman scream. His skin was blistered and peeling from the incessant heat. The rags that he once wore hung off his scorched body in black tatters.

Nora then peered over the wooden half wall and saw Virgil’s hulking green shoulders hunched over the destroyed Protectron’s legs as he tried to jam them into a deactivated Mister Handy.

“GO. BACK. TOGETHER. ROBOT WILL FIX WHAT VIRGIL DID!” Metal on metal clanging filled the cave and Nora looked on in pity at the farce. Apparently, Virgil’s scientific interests remained once the FEV had firmly mutated Dr. Virgil's brilliant mind into that of a full-fledged Super Mutant, but he lacked the technical know-how to actually repair his destroyed Protectron.

Suddenly, Dr. Virgil stopped and sniffed the air loudly. Nora trained her gun on him, but she couldn’t get a clean shot at his neck.

“WHO’S THERE?” He roared. When he turned around, Nora caught a glimpse of his bloodshot eyes. The glasses that were once perched on his fat nose now hung askew and were broken.

“I CAN SMELL YOU HUMAN.” Virgil growled. Small stones crumbled off the walls from his heavy steps. “STOP HIDING!”

Nora backed up into the cave’s tight corridor but Virgil was advancing on her quickly. He had abandoned the too-small 10mm gun in favor of a homemade two-by-four board with nails and metal shrapnel welded into it like a medieval mace.

“STOOPID HUMAN!” He roared.

Virgil advanced on Nora quickly. She fired once and the syringe hit his jugular yet it seemed to have no effect. She executed a side-roll to the left as he came charging at her and caught his thick tree trunk like leg with her armored one. His huge mass tumbled forward, unable to keep balance, and he fell headlong into his chemistry station. The cacophony of twisted metal, broken glass, and bestial roars in pain was loud enough to create a painful feedback sensation in Nora's cybernetic.

She loaded another syringe into the gun just in case and then unholstered her Institute pistol and discharged it into the wall near Virgil’s groaning and growling form.

“Die you mutant freak.” She snarled in faux rage. Her gun discharged nearly a foot above Virgil’s head. The scientists listening in back at the SRB would be able to hear Virgil’s groaning coupled with her laser pistol and would put two and two together to come to the incorrect conclusion. Or so Nora thought.

On her second shot, Virgil’s head turned to look over his shoulder. His bloodshot yellow eyes held nothing but pure animalistic rage. Nora didn’t see the large tire that he had grasped in his left hand. Nor could she react when he rolled onto his back, far more deftly than his size should’ve allowed, and threw the tire at her head like a discus.

The mass of rubber and metal would’ve taken her head off her shoulders if she hadn’t ducked in the nick of time. Instead it ripped the synthetic polymer helmet off her head which jarred her neck backwards painfully. She fell onto her back and slammed her bare head against the rocky floor. Her
vision doubled and she felt the need to vomit.

Heavy footsteps rattled rocks from the cave ceiling and the pebbles and dirt fell into Nora’s face. She couldn’t move, but she didn’t know if it was because of her being dazed or if the tire had actually injured her spine.

A meaty green hand grabbed her by the right arm and held her up like a ragdoll. She heard a sickening pop as her shoulder was dislocated. Pain stole the breath from her lungs and her scream cut out into a faint gurgle.

“YOU WILL DIE NOW HUMAN.” Virgil roared and threw Nora down into the firepit like one would throw wood on a dying fire.

Her lungs burned and she coughed as her body upturned the makeshift firepit and the immolated man. A rain of ash, hot coals, and burnt human remains scaled Nora’s face and singed her hair. She rolled out of the heat and landed onto the earthen floor. Her right arm was useless so she grabbed Dr. Li’s gun with her left hand and shot once again at Virgil. This syringe penetrated the mutant’s bare, bulging pectoral muscle, but he still kept coming. There was no way she could get the third and last syringe loaded into the gun with her dislocated shoulder, and she saw no other way to stop the enraged beast.

Although she knew Dr. Li would’ve objected, she had to somehow subdue the beast before her.

*I’m sorry. I tried.* She thought and took the Institute pistol with her left hand and aimed it at Virgil’s head.

This time her shot aimed true. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion as the red laser bolt flashed out from the gun and then hit Virgil in the left eye. He bellowed like a stuck pig and his thick hand grabbed his head. Dark red blood pooled into his hand. His eye socket was a charred hole where his yellow eye once sat.

His other eye locked with Nora’s and she saw it transform from a sickening yellow to a deep cerulean blue.

Virgil fell to his knees and then his hulking form swayed momentarily before falling facedown into the dirt.

She had failed. The fear of discovering what Dr. Li would do and the guilt of killing another innocent in the name of the Institute seemed to drown her in despair and panic.

"Dear God, just let me die here." She whispered out. She didn’t care if Dr. Ayo and the SRB heard her dark wish. She didn’t care if they forbade her from any future missions topside for fear of her mental health. She didn’t care about anything except the pain that tore through her body.

Nausea overtook her, and Nora tried to turn onto her left side to vomit but her neck seized up in warning. Pain and panic flooded her system. She forced herself to remain still; any unnecessary movement could cause further stress on her spinal column and vertebrae. Blood trickled from her nose and her eyes bugged out of her skull from the pain in her neck and right shoulder. She began hyperventilating. Her heart raced and tears mingled painfully with the burns and blood on her face.

“Th-thi-thi.” She stammered out to Ayo’s team. She tried to request the recall transport, but it was unnecessary. Blue swirling light blinded her and moments later the sterile fluorescents of the SRB’s main chamber blinded her.

She coughed and blood pooled on her lips. Two coursers carefully removed the heavy polymer
armor from her chest, arms, and legs. Her guns and her ruined helmet didn’t return back with her -- a small favor for which she was thankful.

Her head was put into a thick neck brace and she was gently but swiftly lifted onto a stretcher.

Men and women, synth workers and human scientists, barked orders to each other as they pushed Nora out of the SRB and into the Institute’s atrium. She heard Ayo’s clipped voice yelling back but she cared little for what he was saying.

“Possible spinal fracture and definite concussion.” One voice said.

“Dislocated shoulder.” Another said. “And she’s gone into shock. Her blood pressure is dropping and her heartbeat is weak.”

“Jesus, she was gone no more than a half an hour. Did Dr. Virgil do this to her?” Another voice to her right said.

“Shut up and focus.” A voice responded. Nora closed her eyes and saw herself on the edge of the abyss. It called out for her to jump. To give in. To let it all end.

“Minor burns and smoke inhalation.” A third said. “Jesus and to think those wastelanders have to deal with those brutes when they can do something like this to a person!”

A dry, warm hand grabbed hers and squeezed it. Nora cracked open her eyes and saw Father’s tired and drawn face as he followed the stretcher into a free examination room. He was in white doctor’s scrubs.

“You did very well, Mother.” His doctor’s mask obscured his smile but his eyes crinkled in accompaniment. “I am proud of you.”

Proud. She though sardonically. Her son was proud of her. She was pulled back to the edge of the abyss and there Nora stood with a choice. She could turn away and return to the pain or she could forsake everything, the Institute, her friends, Nick, and Hancock, and dive into the blissful darkness.

Tears leaked from Nora’s eyes. She had made her choice. She let herself fall into blissful unconsciousness.

“Dammit!” Father cursed. “She’s going into cardiac arrest.”

Nora awoke in a bed. She felt blissful. She felt happy. Pale tendrils of light fluttered through closed shutters like ribbons and Nora rose her pale hand to admire how the natural light reflected off her skin.

A warm weight was against her back and she rolled to her left and saw Hancock. His face was relaxed and he was without his trademark tricorn hat. He was the best thing that Nora had seen in nearly five months.

“Mmm.” his rough voice groaned when Nora’s hand gently caressed his bare, mottled shoulder. “Whach’a need, sunshine. I need my beauty rest. You kept me up much too late last night.”

Nora’s laughed musically and carefree. “I didn’t hear you complaining about that last night.”

The ghoul rolled towards her. The bed sheet flowed off his hips to rest just below his upper thigh. Nora grinned as she eyed his flaccid manhood. Although mottled and scarred like the rest of him,
Nora felt compelled to gently touch it and work him into a frenzy again.

“I could never complain about hearing my name on your lips, sunshine. Especially when you’re coming.” He growled and moved closer to her. Hancock followed her gaze and rolled onto his back unabashedly exposed to the morning air.

“You see something ya like?” He grinned insufferably. His hand gently caressed her breast. His touch was warm and pleasant; Nora sighed contently.

He draped an arm over her side and Nora threw a bare thigh over his hip. They were both naked beneath the sheet but their shared body heat fought against the chilly morning air that leaked in from the cracked double doors.

“Nick’s gonna be waiting for us.” She warned, but her warning held no urgent bite.

Hancock’s hand caressed her face gently. His groggy dark eyes peered at her and Nora captured his thin lips with hers. He exhaled when they connected and wrapped his hand through her thick hair. She groaned lightly when she thought back to the night before when both of his hands were buried in her hair providing firm but gentle encouragement as she pleasured him beneath his desk.

Nora broke away and swung her full weight on top of him. His erection pressed firmly against her mons.

“You’re insatiable.” He chuckled and encouraged her to raise up on her knees so he brushed against her clit.

“You love it.” She moaned out and squeezed his forearms.

“Oh yer fuckin’ right, sunshine.” He groaned out.

Suddenly a painful electric shock seemed to punch her through her chest. She cried out and collapsed against Hancock’s body. Then another shock stole the breath from her lungs and she felt something pull her by her naval.

She wanted to scream out in pain and frustration but something had stollen the breath from her lungs.

“Her vitals are stabilizing.” Father’s voice said which pulled her out of the ether. “Get that shoulder put in a sling now that it’s been put back in place.”

Nora wanted desperately to go back to the dream. The pain of knowing what she had lost was worse than her physical injuries. Bitterness and anger quickly followed.

“Let me go.” She whimpered. “Please. I can’t take this anymore.”

“I believe that Nora is exhibiting some suicidal tendencies, Father.” Ayo’s voice cut in. He sounded concerned. Although Nora knew the truth, she didn’t care.

“I don’t think she’s fit for missions anymore. I think the stress is too much.” This time, Ayo didn’t conceal his glee.

Father sighed. There was an edge to his voice. “Get out of my operating room Dr. Ayo and send Dr. Li back in here.”

Nora cracked open her eyes and saw the fury behind Dr. Ayo’s face. Her hands trembled from the
pain in her neck and back but she maintained eye contact with Ayo. He looked as though he had been slapped.

“Th--If -- Then if that’s what you wish.” He sputtered and left the large operating room without a word.

“C’mon Nora. Stay with me.” Father encouraged as he began shining a penlight in her eyes to determine the severity of her concussion.

The blinding light created a crackling pain across Nora’s temples but she managed to remain conscious long enough for Dr. Li to enter the room.

She saw Nora lying on the operating table. Her severe face lost all color.

“What happened here?” She demanded.

“She has a moderate concussion, a possible spinal fracture, a dislocated shoulder, and some first degree burns.” A nurse rattled off obediently.

“D-Did Virgil do this?” She gaped?

“I’m afraid so.” Father replied grimly.

Nora screamed and whimpered when Father’s cold hands reached behind her head to touch the base of her neck. White hot pain shot down her spine. His touch seemed to sear her nerves and crackle across her skin like lightning.

“I need you to remove the infernal cybernetics from her body.” Father growled. “I was a fool to let Ayo implant them into her. They should’ve never been used after Kellogg. They’re unnatural and I think they’re doing Mother more harm than good.”

Dr. Li looked grim and appraised Nora’s body with the same scientific disinterest that one would appraise a body laying in a morgue. “I can remove the cybernetic in her head, but the limb augmentation and the courser chip in her brain will be harder to remove when she’s already experienced so much physical trauma.”

“I trust that you’ll do what you can, Dr. Li.” Father replied.

A nurse put a plastic oxygen mask over Nora’s face and she felt a sharp prick in her left arm. Before she was pulled back into unconsciousness once more, she looked up at Dr. Li’s spinning face. Her eyes were obscured by the blinding examination lights but she saw the disappointment in the woman’s eyes.

“I’m sorry.” Nora whispered before she fell backwards into oblivion.
Chapter Notes

The later part of this chapter was difficult to write. Hopefully it won't be too challenging to read. This chapter has Rape/NonCon content towards the end and a whole lot of angst throughout.

Don’t worry, though! Chapter 5 will be a palate cleanser to all of this sadness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4 -- Scarred Heart

Virgil cracked open his right eye and swore. He was a man of science, not a mercenary, and he was unaccustomed to the pain that wracked through his body. He was still for a moment and took a few deep, calming breaths but coughed as black, acrid smoke assaulted his nose.

He was laying face down in the dirt that was still damp from his own blood. Grit and rocks coated his mouth but that was a rather minor irritation compared to the incomparable pain that throbbed and burned behind his eye socket. It felt as though someone had punched him in the eye with a branding iron.

The smell of charred flesh overwhelmed his senses. He turned his head to the left and saw the blackened remains of what he presumed was a person. The humanoid figure was charred beyond recognition but the large metal-grated makeshift firepit blazed and crackled. Virgil had no clue as to how the man got there, but he knew that he was somehow responsible for his death, yet he pushed the thought from his mind. Working with the FEV program, and all that it entailed, meant that he was an expert at compartmentalizing his feelings and morals. Instead, he put most of his mental energy on trying to stand up instead.

Virgil tried to raise himself up off the ground but collapsed into a pathetic heap. He tried once more and howled out like a wounded animal from the pain that erupted through his body. His heart pounded and blood trickled down his cheek like warm rain. He managed to push himself up to his hands and knees and saw, or rather gaped at, dirty pale hands as they clawed through the dirt and gravel.

His right hand tentatively felt up his left forearm and then traveled to his bicep and then to his shoulders. He looked down slowly, fighting the dizziness that made him want to collapse back onto the ground again, and saw defined pectorals and rippling abs through his shredded medical scrubs. A small syringe that was no larger than a tranquilizer dart was stuck in his left pectoral. He pulled it out and examined the curious instrument and then saw that one more empty syringe sat in the dirt nearby with its hypodermic needle broken in half.

Nearby, a large truck tire was propped on its side, and a white Institute ammo box sat in the dirt. A black label was stuck to the underside that read PROPERTY OF ADVANCED SYSTEMS. Virgil carefully opened the plastic container and found a couple more identical syringes but these were intact and unused. He dispensed the plunger slightly on one of them and watched as amber liquid spurted out into his hand.
It was his serum. Madison had come through for him after all. Virgil closed up the box and held it against his chest like it was the most precious material in the world. He fought to pull himself up the slight dirt incline but collapsed twice in a panting, painful heap before he made it to the top.

The upturned yellow construction lights illuminated the ceiling and they casted severe shadows across the cave’s large interior. His laboratory was in ruins. His chemistry station was smashed beyond recognition and all of his medical equipment was strewn about amid piles of junk and empty rations and canned foods that looked like they were licked clean.

His Protecteron lied inert and inactive. There was a giant crack through it’s hull and its mechanical legs were gone. A large, jagged piece of glass sat next to the broken robot and he picked it up carefully. His bloody face looked back at him with a grimace that he didn’t recognize. He carefully tilted the glass shard to the left a little more and then dropped it into the dirt upon seeing the gaping black hole that sat in place of his left eye.

His hands trembled uncontrollably as he brought the glass shard up to his face again. Thin tendrils of blood leaked down over his palm from grasping the sharp glass too tightly. Virgil peered into the glass again and examined the wound in his skull.

His entire eye socket was charred and black. The skin around his eye was inflamed and peeling away and a small amount of his skull could be seen on the bottom of his eye socket. He gingerly felt the back of his skull with his left hand but couldn’t determine an exit wound. He deduced that whomever shot him used a low powered energy weapon which cauterized the wound as it destroyed his eye. If the gun had been ballistic, the bullet would’ve certainly blown his brain out through the back of his skull.

Virgil tried to piece together what exactly happened but his memory of the past few weeks was hazy. The last thing he remembered was sending one final message to Madison Li.

Oh God, he thought. Madison must think I’m dead.

He crawled over to his upturned terminal and put it upright. Thankfully it was still plugged into the generator but the screen was badly cracked and several of the keys were missing from the keyboard.

He typed carefully but kept his message short. The adrenaline that was dulling the pain was dissipating and the entire left side of his face sent a sharp stabbing pain through his brain.

>> I’m alive. You came through for me. Thank you. -- B

He pressed the ENTER key and heard the terminal beep in confirmation. His message was sent and he then pulled the electrical chord from the generator.

Virgil rose unsteadily to his feet and threw some supplies into a backpack. He grabbed two syringes of Med-X and injected one into his left arm and another into a vein in his shoulder. He didn’t dare double up the injections in the same spot for fear that his vein would collapse and the Med-X wouldn’t get into this system fast enough.

He also packed up all of the Rad-X and RadAway that he could find. His food rations ran out long ago -- long before his mind fully succumbed to the FEV, but his Super Mutant body handled the famine remarkably well. Still, he wasn’t sure how his renewed human body would handle the long trek back through The Glowing Sea. Even though his body was in far better physical shape than it had ever been in his life, since spending most of his adult life in the Institute kept his mind active but left him woefully unprepared for the physical endurance one needed to survive in the
wasteland, he knew that The Glowing Sea was teeming with dangerous wildlife. If the rads didn’t kill him first, then the deathclaws and radscorpions surely would.

Then Virgil packed the burnt eye socket with thick gauze dipped in a mixture of a stimpack and another dose of Med-X. He whimpered and bit his lip as the entire left side of his face ached and then he bandaged up the gaping eye socket with thick white wrapping. He couldn’t risk getting an infection or an abscess in the wound. Either would surely kill him.

Lastly, he grabbed the five leather-bound journals and the assorted posters that he had used to record his scientific findings on how FEV progressed through his body. Although the handwriting on the backs of the posters was semi-illegible and done in crayon, he needed all of his most recent findings if he was going to proceed with his work. After all, suffering from a debilitating injury didn’t stifle the excitement and pure jubilation that he felt upon knowing that his serum could cure individuals infected with FEV.

Virgil changed laboriously into traveling clothes and covered his good eye with a pair of road goggles. Coupled with his backpack, Virgil limped out of the cave that had once shielded him from the Institute’s ever watchful eye and walked out into the gloomy yellow-tinged day.

“Mother, can you hear me?” A gentle voice pulled Nora from the darkness.

She awoke and found herself in the same hospital room as the day that she arrived at the Institute. Father, just like last time, was at the foot of her bed in his white doctor’s uniform. Everything felt like deja vu, except this time there was an emptiness in Nora’s brain. Something was lacking about her but she couldn’t put her finger on what it was.

“What happened?” She croaked. Her memory of the events after Virgil collapsed were hazy. Her head throbbed painfully but she found that her hands bound to the edges of the bed.

Father looked grimly at her. “You’ve suffered some pretty serious injuries, Mother. The concussion you recieved from your encounter with Virgil was just the tip of the iceberg. We also discovered that you’ve fractured your C1 vertebra.”

Nora tried to look down at her blanket-covered body but found that she couldn’t move her neck. A thick material wrapped around her neck to stabilize her head.

“A-a-am I paralyzed?” She whispered in horror. If she ended up paralyzed from the neck down, she knew that she would have no chance of escaping the Institute on her own. Suffering from such a debilitating injury would certainly be a life sentence.

“No, you’re not.” Father replied gently. “You were very fortunate. The vertebra is merely fractured and your spinal chord didn’t sever from the result of the impact. We heard the commotion, but we don’t know what exactly happened. Perhaps you could fill me in on how you sustained such an injury.”

Nora wracked her brain and tried to remember what exactly happened with her encounter with Virgil.

Her voice sounded far away and hollow when she finally spoke, “I shot at Virgil and missed. He had collapsed against a pile of his chemistry supplies and I thought I had him finished. But then he threw a truck tire at me like it was a frisbee. I ducked but not soon enough. Then he -- I think he grabbed me and threw me into the fire pit. I managed to roll out before I got too burned and then I shot him ... in the head.”
She blinked away tears and didn’t meet Father’s searching eyes. Virgil not only saved her life from the deathclaw attack and from radiation poisoning, but he also pointed her towards building the molecular relay. He didn’t have to help her. Hell, he could’ve let her die when Hancock carried her in to his cave that fateful day. But he didn’t. Nora bottled up the guilt that threatened to crash over her. She’d deal with it later. One day she’d make herself pay, she thought.

“Mother, you also said something while you were topside that I’d like to discuss with you. Please don’t take this as an attack. Believe me when I say that I’m sympathetic towards the incredible adjustment you’ve gone through since arriving here.”

Nora bristled at where Father was going but she remained silent.

“Are you thinking about taking your own life?” Father asked bluntly.

Nora blinked twice. She was unsure about how to answer. The first response that jumped into her head was to deny everything and to chalk it up to a fever dream. Her second response was to lie about everything. She could easily throw Ayo under the bus and blame the despondency and depression on him, but whether it was Father’s piercing eyes or her secret desire to share this dark secret with someone, Nora told the truth.

“Yes.” She whispered.

To his credit, Father maintained a neutral face. He nodded as though he was confirming a secret suspicion of his own. “Are you that unhappy here that death would be a preferable alternative?”

Nora couldn’t meet his eyes. “Shaun, whether you like it or not, I have friends topside who are worried about me. I have people who miss me and I desperately miss them. I never imagined that coming to the Institute would mean a prison sentence. I was never given a choice in the matter. I’m just as imprisoned here as I was back in that vault, it’s just that my cage looks slightly different.”

She expected to see Father look sympathetic but saw that he only looked confused and worried.

“I’m sorry that you feel that way. Coming here was never meant to be a punishment. I knew you were looking for me, and I figured that I’d expedite the process a bit. When I released you from that vault, I --”

“Wait, you released me?” She asked in shock. Her mind tried to process the betrayal but the truth moved slowly through her body, partly out of denial and partly because she was already saturated with several other complicated and bottled up emotions.

Father shifted uncomfortably on the edge of the bed. “An old man like me has a lot of regrets Mother, and not releasing you sooner is one of them. When I was a young man, I discovered the truth behind my lineage. The CIT had connections with Vault Tec to supply us with specimen to help further their research. My kidnapping was the first round of that. Then I decided to perform an experimentation of my own. When I released you, I did so to see what happened.”

To see what happened. His voice echoed in her head and Nora felt like he had punched her in the gut. “I was nothing more than an experiment to you?”

“Yes, at first.” He replied quietly. “But then when I heard reports of how you were surviving out there, I decided that I needed to finally meet you.”

“And what do you think now?” Nora spat venomously, “Did I pass your experiment. Were your results useful for whatever fucked up study you were trying to perform?”
“The results have been ... inconclusive.” Father replied judiciously. “That all depends on you and your health. There are several things we can do to help you alleviate some of your depressive symptoms: medications, therapy, electroshock therapy…”

Nora shouted. “Fuck no! You can go to hell!”

The dam that held back all of her pain and fear was beginning to leak, but Father ignored her outburst.

“Have you at least considered changing your mindset?” He said gently, “Instead of looking at this place as a prison, think of all the things it can offer. You have a clean facility, indoor plumbing, hot food three times a day, and you don’t have to worry about chem-addicted Raiders trying to murder you. And if you’re hurting for companionship, I know several scientists who are single. There are no rules against engaging in relationships as long as its consensual and it doesn’t interfere with our scientific studies.”

“You need to tell the part about consensual relationships to Ayo” Nora spat venomously. “In case it’s skipped your notice, but Ayo seems to have selective hearing when women tell him ‘no’”

Father sighed regretfully, “I am well aware of Ayo’s indiscretions and I’ve demanded that he stay away from you from now on. His business with you has been concluded anyway. We are changing our tactics with the Gen-3 synth program and we are disbanding our coursers.”

“Wait, you’re disbanding them? Why?”

“Because their presence above ground is not conducive to showing the Commonwealth that we are not a threat. Besides, we have spies topside who can relay important information back to us. It was never my intention to attack the Commonwealth, and I fear that the coursers’ presence topside has given off the wrong impression.” Father explained patiently.

He continued, “Mother, you’ve performed your tasks admirably. I am very proud of you for that, but you’ll no longer be assigned to the courser division from here on out. I think the decision is best considering that you’re healing and that you’re working through some pretty serious mental health issues.”

Nora’s blood ran cold. She was no longer a courser. She could no longer go topside. This was the opposite of what she thought was going to happen. Dr. Ayo promised her that she’d be rewarded if she eliminated Virgil. She laughed bitterly at how naive she had been.

“Did you just do this to eliminate any hope that I ever had?” She croaked, “You know what being a courser meant to me. I’ve served faithfully under you for four months and this is the thanks I get?”

Nora’s voice was starting to crescendo into a frantic, shrill noise. “I mean, no wonder I want to kill myself. You’ve removed any joy that I could possibly have in my life!”

“Mother. You need to calm down.” Father replied patiently. “You’re still experiencing some pretty severe mood swings as your brain adjusts to not relying on the cybernetic implant.”

Now Nora knew what she was missing. She could feel the cool air tickle her right temple and her right cheek. A heavy bandage covered her right part of her face and she knew that Dr. Li had removed the infernal cybernetic implant. At least she had came through on her bargain, even if Nora hadn’t came through on hers.

Nora glared at the monster that sat across from her. “Get out.”
“Mother please.” He replied gently.

“STOP CALLING ME THAT!” She roared. She writhed against her bonds but her neck protested her jerking movements.

“Don’t let your pain and anger take control of you.” He reasoned gently. “The pain you’re experiencing is temporary.”

“YOU KNOW NOTHING OF MY PAIN.” Nora snarled. The dam that held all of her emotions at bay had finally collapsed. She couldn’t stop. The words tumbled from her mouth like an avalanche of disgust, hatred, and anger.

Father didn’t flinch at her rage. Instead he looked at her with a measured, cautious expression like he was observing a volatile chemical reaction.

“You were the worst thing to happen to me, you know.” Nora spat. Her voice wavered and crackled. “You were an accident. If it wasn’t for your father, I would’ve had an abortion. I lost everything because of you. I quit school and gave up my dream of becoming a lawyer. I was robbed of having other kids because of you. I lost my husband BECAUSE OF YOU. I’m no scientist, but I’d consider that this entire fucked up experiment has failed.”

Nora knew she was being unfair but she refused to take the words back. They came out of her burning with vitriol and hatred and taking them back was simply intolerable. Yet, she hated herself for saying them. She hated herself for causing her son such pain, even if her words were the deep, dark truth.

“Well,” He cleared his throat. For a man of sixty years, he still was unfamiliar with the deep tug of sorrow that pulled at his chest. He was also confused by the tiny amount of liquid that escaped from his eyes. He brushed it away quickly and regained his composure. “I’m sorry that I was such an inconvenience, Nora.”

“I am too.” She whispered and then closed her eyes.

She heard the whoosh of the automatic door open and close. The silence in the room was deafening and Nora let her sobs echo in the sterile air.

A week later, Nora was transferred back to her room by a swath of Gen-3 synths. They removed the sling from her shoulder but kept the neck brace on. Nora pretended to be asleep during the entire transport back to her room. She couldn’t bare to see the curious and pitiful looks from the Institute scientists, and she couldn’t bare to see her son’s face. She knew spoke out of anger and she didn’t mean what she had said, but her pride wouldn’t let her admit that to her son.

She was transported from the stretcher to her bed quickly and then the Gen-3 synths left without a word. Nora’s first order of business was to check the side of her mattress for the pills that she had squirreled away. Her hand traced the seam that stretched around the mattress until she found the small hole that she had cut open. She closed her hand tightly and pushed it into dense foam padding. Dread and a curious sense of relief filled her; her bag of pills were gone.

Nora didn’t bother cursing for she had no strength left and getting angry over something that was inevitable was a waste of energy. Of course, Father would’ve gone through her room and removed any and all items that might pose a risk to her. He’d be careless not to.

She limped to the bathroom and saw that her toiletries -- her shaving razor, shaving cream, and shampoo -- had been removed. In its place was a small bar of soap the size of a matchbook. When
she looked back into the bedroom, she saw that the bottle of wine she stashed behind the desk, as well as her terminal, had been removed too.

Ayo’s black security camera that sat above her door stared unwaveringly at her with it’s lifeless, haunting eye. The red light above it was the only other vibrant color in the bleak, whitewashed room. She flipped the camera her middle finger and rummaged through the dresser to find a shirt to throw over it. Even if Father told Ayo to stay away from her, she could still feel his influence.

She slammed the dresser in frustration when she discovered that each drawer was completely empty. Besides the hospital gown that was on her back, Nora was completely destitute and naked.

She punched the intercom button by the door and heard a synth’s voice respond robotically, “How may I assist you, Mother.”

“Where are my clothes? I want them back.”

Allie Filmore’s light voice came over the intercom, “You will get the back soon, Mother. You’ve been placed under a 48 hour watch until Father can be satisfied that you are no longer emotionally distressed.”

Nora laughed bitterly. “Well there’s been a lot of emotionally distressing things going on today.”

“I understand.” Allie agreed. “Is there anything else you require?”

“Can I get some playing cards or a book to read?” Nora asked. “If I’m in solitary for 48 hours, can I at least occupy myself? I promise that I won’t paper cut myself to death.”

“No Mother, I’m sorry. We can’t do that.”

Allie didn’t really sound sorry and Nora’s head thumped against the wall in defeat. She punched the button on the intercom to end the conversation and went back to her bed.

The fabric was uncomfortably coarse and the pillows that she once had were removed -- probably to prevent her from suffocating herself -- and she stared at the ceiling. There were no defining characteristics, no cracks, paint drips, or blemishes on the white ceiling, it was completely smooth and unremarkable. At least in the wasteland, each hovel and ruined building held a story. Sure they were mostly sad stories, but they were stories nonetheless. This room held nothing but sterile emptiness and it was driving Nora insane.

After a few minutes, which seemed like a few hours, Nora couldn’t bare to look at her prison cell anymore and closed her eyes. She wasn’t tired, but she willed herself into a sleep-like state and listened to her thumping heartbeat. Her pulse was rhythmic and almost soothing, coupled with her slow and steady breathing, she let herself slip into a meditative state. Eventually her neck and back stopped aching and Nora’s lip twitched in satisfaction.

How very Zen. She thought sarcastically. However, her thought pulled her out of the peaceful stasis that she had created and the pain in her neck and the low whirl of the air filtration system popped back into focus. Nora let out a groan which escalated into a frustrated growl.

Again she tried to focus on her breathing and her heartbeat. Thankfully the relaxed feeling returned quickly and Nora willed herself to let her thoughts float out of her head as quickly as they appeared.

She thought about Nick and wondered what he and Ellie were talking about as Nick worked himself even more ragged trying to find a way to get to Nora. She thought about Hancock and how he was probably amassing an army to storm the Institute’s front door. She also thought about
Diamond City, about the twinkling lights that laced through the Marketplace and about the sounds of people chattering over their dinners of noodle cups. She could almost hear Arturo’s friendly voice as he crowed out, “Guns, armor, weaponry. Don’t go into the ‘wealth unprepared!’”

She was so close to falling asleep that she didn’t register that the woosh she heard wasn’t part of her imagination. That the footsteps towards her bed weren’t the sound of Diamond City guards marching from the barracks and up the metal stairs. That the hand covering her mouth wasn’t synthetic or mottled skin.

Nora’s body jolted awake and her eyes snapped open. The lights in the room were dim and the weight upon her body was oppressive and painful. She tried to buck the body off of her but he pressed his left knee into her inner thigh and which sent raw pulses of pain up through her femoral nerve.

“The more you struggle, the more painful this will be for you.” The voice growled in her ear. She knew it was Ayo. His minty toothpaste breath assaulted her nose and bile rose to her throat.

He kicked the blankets down off Nora’s legs and pushed up her hospital gown. She tried to cross her legs, but his thigh blocked hers, and he roughly pushed two fingers inside of her.

She cried out in muffled pain. Her body rejected his penetration and a hot friction coursed across her vaginal walls.

“This won't do at all.” He clucked in disapproval and licked his fingers several times before inserting them back into her body.

Nora squirmed against his touch but the neck brace she wore limited her movement as well as put painful pressure on her healing vertebra.

“Please don’t.” She begged but his hand muffled her sound.

His fingers curled inside of her and pain mixed with thin tendrils of pleasure. Her body responded naturally which elicited a triumphant cry from her rapist’s mouth.

“So normal humans can make you wet.” He grinned and removed his fingers. “I'll be sure to write this down in my report.”

Ayo stuck his two fingers roughly inside of Nora’s mouth and swirled them around in the back of her throat. They tasted like copper and her slightly sweet musk. She gagged and choked and then bit down on the offending digits hard enough to send electric pain up through the roof of her mouth. She tasted blood and heard Ayo howl in pain and rage.

Then she saw the blur of his other hand as he punched her across the face. She released him and layed in the bed in a daze. She cursed herself for not moving, for not going on the offensive faster, because it gave Ayo time to bind her wrists with surgical tubing.

“I will kill you when I’m done with you.” He hissed and stuffed part of a blanket into her mouth. “But don’t be afraid to enjoy yourself in the meantime.”

He pulled down his pants to his knees and tugged himself quickly and roughly. Nora couldn’t look at him. Instead, she locked her eyes on the ceiling and played dead.

She went back into her meditative state. She disconnected herself from the event. The jostling of the bed and the pain between her legs meant nothing to her. Just like her thoughts from before, she let each unpleasant moment of her reality pass by unnoticed and unacknowledged.
She heard him huff and pant and then felt his weight collapse on top of her which pinned her bound hands to her breasts. His hot breath tickled her ear and then he began placing soft, almost loving kisses, on her neck and exposed collar bone.

In his post-orgasmic haze, he didn’t feel that Nora’s left hand had slipped out from the tubing. Nor did he feel her untie the tubing from her right wrist. What he did feel, however, was her hands pulling the tubing taught and wrapping it around the back of his neck and crossing over his front like a shoestring.

He jolted up from Nora’s chest; his eyes held nothing but surprise until he saw that Nora’s held nothing but contempt for him.

“What are you--” Nora cut off his voice with a steady pull of the tubing. All of the blood in his head pooled in his face and his eyes rolled into the back of his head as Nora cut off his carotid arteries.

Within three seconds he collapsed heavily on top of her and she rolled both of them off the bed and onto the floor. She spit out the blanket and took a few shuddering breaths. The tubing had gone slack and Ayo’s eyes fluttered open but Nora adjusted herself so she straddled his chest. His ejaculate and her blood smeared across his stomach.

“You fucking cu--” Nora snapped the tubing tightly against his neck but this time she applied pressure until she heard a sickening crunch and saw blood bubble to his florid lips. He gurgled and his body writhed beneath her violently. Nora’s thighs clamped tightly around his body and she moved with him, riding him like he was a skittish horse.

When his body finally stopped writhing, she let go of the tubing and stood unsteadily to her feet.

Nora looked down at her bloody hands and thighs. Her skin looked unnaturally pale against the dark red fluid that stained her body.

Then she looked at Ayo’s body lying on his back with his pants around his knees. She looked at the blood that stained the head and shaft of his penis and realized that it was from her. His violent rape had made her bleed.

Insatiable rage twisted through Nora’s mind and she ran towards Ayo’s prone body and landed a kick in between his legs. His body jolted lifelessly but Nora kicked him again, and again, and again until her toes throbbed and until blood began trailing out from between his legs.

Her revenge wasn’t anywhere near done. Her bloodlust wasn’t sated. Nora looked around the room for anything she could use and saw a metal folding chair that was tucked up against the desk. It was surprisingly light and Nora lifted it high over her head and brought it down onto Ayo’s face with a heavy smack. She heard the sound of bones crunching and then she brought the chair up to her face again. The next hit sounded like she was cracking walnuts and the third had a sickening squelching sound that accompanied the broken bones.

Nora was so engrossed in her bloodlust that she didn’t hear the door open, nor did she hear the two coursers that came up behind her. They grabbed her arms before she could bring the chair’s edge down on Ayo’s already broken windpipe. The bloodstained metal clattered to the floor.

“LET ME GO!” Nora screamed and writhed but the coursers held her fast and pinned her to the ground on her stomach. She felt a pinch in her neck as one of them injected her with something.

They pushed her face into the sterile linoleum while a third immobilized her legs and pinned her
arms painfully behind her back. She heard the door open again and saw a pair of black leather shoes approach her.

“Nora, what have you done?” Father asked. He sounded horrified. Nora’s irritation outweighed her shame.

“He raped me.” She said. This time her voice was level. The drug was beginning to take effect. She was starting to feel a blissful apathy surge through her body and extinguish the fire that singed her veins.

Father seemed to ignore her and when the coursers lifted her to her knees, she saw that Father didn’t seem to care. He believed her, sure. The evidence was on Nora’s naked thighs and belly. However, he didn’t seem to care.

“You’ve killed one of our scientists -- one of our top scientists -- in cold blood.” His voice was cold but his eyes were even colder. Nora saw no semblance of Nate in her son then. Her son was a tyrant and she knew he would exact her punishment quickly.

“What can I say,” Nora hissed with an irate smirk, “You can take the girl out of the wasteland, but you can’t --”

“ENOUGH!” Father roared. Nora flinched and even the coursers twitched uncomfortably.

“The penalty for killing one of our own is death by firing squad.” Father growled. “However, since you want death so badly, I think a more fitting punishment is to keep you alive for a little longer.”

Nora rolled her eyes, “Oh spare me your misguided morals. You and I both know that if you execute me and word of my death gets topside then you’ve failed to spread the message that the Institute is not a threat. Even if I kill myself, I’ll still die as a martyr -- a woman driven to the brink by the Institute’s vile influence-- and if you execute me, then the entire world will see the Institute’s true face. But if you keep me alive,” she looked her son in the face and articulated her next words carefully so he could understand each and every syllable, “I. Will. Make. Your. Life. Hell.”

Father’s upper lip curled into a grimace and his white teeth were barred in a challenge. “Put her in a cell in the basement. I don’t want to see her. I don’t want to hear about her. She is dead to me.”

The two coursers grabbed Nora roughly and dragged her out the door. Before they even made it to the elevator, Nora’s head lolled to her chest as the medication that they gave her finally took effect.

Chapter End Notes

Virgil's life for Ayo's ... I think that's a fair trade.
The Great Escape

Chapter 5 -- The Great Escape

Keeping accurate time was paramount to Nora. From the first day that she arrived in the Institute, she kept track of the amount of days, weeks, and eventually months that had passed. Her internal calendar marked five months, one week, and two days when she killed Virgil. She knew that another week had passed as she recovered in the hospital room and another week passed after that when she was moved back to her room. She knew that Ayo’s rape and her subsequent banishment happened on the fifth month, third week, and third day.

Now she marked the passing of time by the water that dripped incessantly onto her face from the earthen ceiling. She counted the number of times that a courser threw her a package of cold bagged food which she let sit where it landed in the dirt. She counted the number of mice that scurried through her cage as they went to and from their burrow. The mice were all white and she assumed that they all escaped from the bioscience labs. They were the only friendly creatures that she saw while she was imprisoned. That was until she had accumulated seven food bags in her large cell. Seven food products were delivered which marked the passing of another week. Now the count was at five months, four weeks, and three days. On this day, her internal calendar stopped once and for all.

At first, she thought that the crumbling rocks falling off the earthen ceiling was a product of her imagination. She had gone long enough without food -- surviving only by drinking the water that dripped incessantly onto her head so it wasn’t unreasonable for her to start hallucinating. But when the pebbles turned into softball-sized chunks of earth, Nora realized that something was terribly wrong.

She rose shakily from her perch in the corner and winced as her stiff muscles protested each movement. Dirt rose up into thick clouds as the earth ceiling collapsed in on itself. She coughed and covered her mouth with the makeshift doctors scrubs that the coursers gave her after they put her in the cell. Once the air cleared, Nora peeked over her shoulder and saw artificial light and heard muffled voices above her.

“Quick, get your girl up here. We gotta go!” An unfamiliar voice called out.

“Nora?” Someone called down to her. “Are you okay?”

She looked up through the bright hole and saw a mess of blond hair poking into her line of sight.

“Liam?” She croaked out. Her mouth tasted like dirt and she spit a few times before speaking again. “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting you out. What else would I be doing? I’m sorry that I couldn’t get to you sooner.”

The controlled cave-in created a steep earthen ramp up out of the cell. She crawled her way up the loose soil and felt Liam’s gentle hand as he grabbed her bicep and hauled her to her feet.

She blinked and looked around. They were in an unfinished part of the Institute. Where white linoleum ended, hard packed dirt and sand began. Eight nervous eyes looked back at her. The four people were all dressed in synth uniforms and they all had laser pistols on their hips.

“I know this is a lot to take in right now, Nora.” Liam said. “We don’t have a whole lot of time. After you five leave, I’ll not be able to use this escape route again, so we have to move fast.”
The four synths seemed to know where to go and they took off down the far tunnel and went around an inactive bulldozer. Liam pulled Nora by the hand and tried to encourage her to run. After no more than ten feet, Nora slowed to a painful limp as her neck and back injury and her food-deprived body protested the physical exertion.

“I can’t run, Liam.” She croaked. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He replied quickly while still pulling her along at a fast walk. “You’re lucky to be alive. After I heard what Ayo did, I thought he had killed you. I mean, that’s what happened last time. But then when I saw them bring his body into the morgue, I mean ... Damn Nora ... I would’ve done the same to him if you hadn’t.”

“This has happened before?” Nora asked.

Liam looked uncomfortable with the question but he spoke quickly, “About four years ago, right after his boss Zimmer left, he had his eye on a young synth woman who didn’t know she was a synth. It was one of my dad’s experiments. He wanted to see how a synth would act if she didn’t know she her true identity. She was working in Ayo’s department as a data entry worker. They struck up a mutual relationship, but then Ayo started snooping in on my father’s terminal and found out the truth. He took it out on the poor woman and my father was reprimanded pretty seriously by Father.”

“None of that was your father’s fault.” Nora replied.

“No,” He agreed, “But as a result, any synth topside or any synth who is promoted to a roll other than menial janitorial work is recorded and logged on a terminal. Even if they don’t know they’re a synth, we sure do.”

As they walked through the meandering cave system, the air began to smell less sterile and more earthy and damp. Nora assumed they were close to the banks of the Charles River.

Liam pulled out a portable GPS that had a PipBoy map on the display. He followed their path with the small computer’s cursor and then pointed them down the right fork of the tunnel.

“We need to get about 100 more yards down here before there will be a ladder for you all to climb to the surface.” He replied.

“How long have you been doing this Liam?” Nora asked curiously.

He shrugged nonchalantly but his subdued face tried to suppress a grin and failed. “I’ve been doing this since I was fourteen.”

“What? That’s insane!” Nora exclaimed.

Liam nodded. “I know. But I figure that if everyone has a calling, then this one is mine. My dad’s work building the synths is a moral experiment for him. He really believes that all synths have souls. Synths can dream, they can experience real emotion, and they need everything us normal humans do to thrive. While they can’t physically age or gain weight, synths are still humans and should have the inalienable rights that humans do. It’s my duty to fight for that.”

“You’re amazing, you know.” Nora commented. Honestly, she didn’t know that many seventeen year olds, but she knew what she was like at seventeen and being a self-sacrificing freedom fighter for synth liberation didn’t even come close.

“Wait to sing my praises until we can get you topside.” He smirked and walked to the head of the group.
“Here’s the door to the utility tunnel.” Liam said.

Earth melded into grated metal and a nondescript, heavy metal door sat in front of them. The sign above it had long ago rusted away and it took the efforts of Liam and a strong dark-skinned synth to push the rusted door open.

Cool air assaulted their faces and one of the synth women pulled out a flashlight from her pocket. The ladder they needed was on their left and it ascended high into the darkness.

“You have a big climb ahead of you.” Liam warned. “But when you get topside, you’ll be looking for a man with a wagon. I don’t know his name but the safety code is to ask him if he has any Product #13 for sale. He should respond with, ‘Does 100 caps sound right to you?’”

Nora stifled a laugh at how similar this code was to the Railroad’s call signs. She assumed that this contact was once -- or was still -- affiliated with the Railroad. Although she heard whispers from Ayo and his team that the Railroad had fallen, she figured that any remaining members would do their damnedest to continue their mission of synth liberation no matter the cost.

“Nora, I suggest that you go first. That way you can set the pace and if you run into trouble, then you have people who can help you from below.”

“How is she suppose to get us outta here before daybreak?” A petite woman with short dark hair asked. “She’s weak and barely surviving as is. What if she falls? The climb is at least 100 feet or so. Nevermind the fact that we need to have a quick getaway if we’re gonna escape the coursers once they realize we’re gone.”

“Your contact up top will take care of Nora. You just help her get there.” Liam said. For being only seventeen, his voice commanded authority like he was at least ten years older.

Liam turned to Nora and handed her a vial with two small, green pills. “You take one of these if you think you’re gonna faint or fall off that ladder. But only take one. I’ve given you two in case you encounter trouble up top, but taking two at once or in close succession could give you a heart attack.”

“What is it?” Nora eyed the vial curiously.

“This is Buffout. It’s a Pre War steroid. The CIT still had some supplies left over as part of one of their contracts with the Pre War military.”

“Search the area!” A voice echoed through the tunnel, “Mother has escaped and four synths are unaccounted for. Lock down the relays until further notice.”

The courser’s voice sounded much too close and Liam silently urged them all to start climbing. Nora grabbed on to the cold metal rungs and climbed as swiftly as her aching back and her fatigued body would allow. She heard the slight electric fizzle of a Stealth Boy activating and then she heard nothing except the clink clacking of hands and feet clambering up the metal ladder.

After what felt like an hour of straight climbing, Nora heaved all of her weight against the metal manhole cover while under the effects of the first Buffout capsule. Her body felt strong and her shoulders no longer ached. She felt like she could run a marathon in record time and the boost to her physical strength gave boost to her confidence as well.

They all surfaced quietly and then Nora replaced the manhole cover over the ladder. The moonless night meant that the sky was awash in a blanket of stars and the light breeze from the river tickled
Nora’s bare shoulders and blew the longer part of her hair around her ear.

“Hey!” A voice barked. Nora and the rest of the escaped synths jumped in fright. The large black man, who Nora heard was named Benjamin, boomed out a warning.

“Don’t come any closer! Unless you got some Product #13, you can fuck right off.”

“How much do youse want for it?” The voice came out from the darkness. His voice seemed calm and it held a strange accent that Nora couldn’t place. “Is one hundred caps enough?”

Benjamin looked at the three other synths warily. Nora saw that his eyes passed over her more out of distrust instead of fear. If Liam was to be believed, then this man who had answered their silly call sign correctly was a supposed ally.

Nora took the lead and walked through the oppressive darkness blindly. Once she got close enough for him to see her, his dark eyes widened in surprise instead of fear.

“Shit! Nora you’re alive ... Uh.” He paused and looked at the other four synths behind her.

“How do you know me?” Nora demanded. If she had a gun, she would’ve drawn it on the stranger but instead she clenched her fists and raised them to her chest like she was ready to fight.

The man laughed. His laugh spread into his lower gut until he was holding his stomach like he was going to bust a seam.

“Stop laughing asshole.” Nora hissed. She figured that with the Buffout in her system, she could take this man in a hand-to-hand fight. “Tell me how the fuck you know me or I’ll punch you in the face.”

The man managed to get himself under control long enough and then took a few calming breaths, “I’m sorry. When my contact told me I’d be pickin’ up four targets, he never said nothing about a fifth bein’ you, Nora.”

Nora frowned. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Look, this is a sweet reunion and all, but we need to get the fuck outta here.” A red-haired woman with freckles said and approached the man. “We need to get to a place named the Hub. Do you know that place?”

“Sure, sure.” The man said. He seemed grateful that the woman changed the subject. “I got my wagon ‘round the corner here. I’ll take two of youse to the Hub and then I’ll take two more of you over to Diamond City and Hangman’s Alley. That settlement’s brand new, but it’s right safe and cozy.”

“There’s five of us.” Nora pointed out. The Buffout was beginning to wear off and Nora fought to keep herself from sinking to her knees. Liam never told her that the Buffout only gave you the adrenaline necessary to fight, it didn’t augment your strength so you wouldn’t be fatigued afterwards.

“I see that, darlin’” The man replied impatiently. His breath came out like steam in the cold air. “But I gots orders to send you on over to Goodneighbor.”

“On whose orders?” She growled. Nora was getting tired of being moved like she was a pawn on a chessboard.
“The Mayor.” He replied flatly. “I gots some caps in it for me. If you come along nice and quiet like, I’ll split the caps with you.”

“I can just go on by myself.” Nora replied. “I know the way and there are people looking for me. I don’t want to get them all wrapped up in my mess.”

The four synths nodded. Nora was a fugitive of the Institute and they all knew that helping her escape was more of a sin than actually escaping the Institute themselves.

“That’s mighty kind of you, but I got orders to deliver you to Goodneighbor in secret. So unless you got a stash of Stealth Boys hiding in your pants, I insist that you come with me. Quickly too if you don’t mind. We’re sittin’ ducks out here for snipers to pick off.”

The four synths approached the man obediently but Nora hesitated. She could run. She could turn away the helping hand and just make her own way to Goodneighbor. But then again, she was weak, emaciated, and inured and her clothes were embossed with the Institute's logo. She might as well wear a neon sign that said “KILL ON SIGHT.”

“Ya comin’ hon?” The man called back, “We’re burnin starlight here.”

Nora sighed and followed after the synths. As they rounded the corner by the Fraternal Post, she saw them all stripping quickly as the man dropped bags full of clothes at their feet.

“Name’s Miguel by the way.” He announced to everyone but his eyes seemed to linger on Nora. “Yer all gonna be assuming disguises until I can get ya someplace safe. It’s best to not talk to nobody or draw any attention to yerself. Most of the roads are pretty safe, but you never can be too careful.”

Once the four synths were dressed, Miguel led them to a wagon that was hitched up to a thickly-muscled brahmin. Nora was no longer phased by the existence of a two-headed cow, but the synths gaped at the animal having never encountered a two-headed anything let alone a cow.

“Don’ worry. Shelly here ain’t gonna hurt you. She’s a right dumb beast but she’s strong.”

Miguel pulled a petite woman with dark cropped hair over to the wagon and slid out the thin plywood that covered what Nora thought was the wagon’s bottom to reveal that the wagon’s bottom actually extended down a full eighteen inches.

“Nora, you ain’t claustrophobic are ya?” Miguel asked.

She wanted to reply with the truth. Even before the vault, she didn’t care for tight spaces but she figured that her response wouldn’t matter in the slightest.

“I’ll manage.” She grumbled.

“Good.” he replied. “What about you, hon?”

The petite woman shook her head. “No, I worked on cleaning out the air ducts when they got clogged and I had to climb up and inside of them.”

“Great! So you two are gonna climb up inside the wagon here. I’ll put the board back over you and I’ll put some of my produce and supplies on top. It’s gonna be a bumpy ride so try not to squirm or make too much noise.”

“You men ...” He turned to Benjamin and a watery-eyed, blond haired synth named Toby, “...are
gonna be my bodyguards. You both look tough and that’s why I chose you. But I’ll be doin’ most of the fighting if we get into too much trouble.

Toby looked nervous but Benjamin grinned. Apparently, he had found his calling.

“And what about me?” The redhead asked. She was dressed in threadbare farmers clothes. The yellow work gloves didn’t quite fit her slim hands and the coveralls were baggy enough that everyone would be able to see down her undershirt if she bent over too far.

“You, my pretend wife, are gonna sit up on the wagon while I walk ahead of Shelly. Your story is that we both came down from Abernathy Farm to sell our produce. We’re working with Blake and his family so we can make enough caps to start our own farm.” Miguel spoke quickly and Nora knew that he was making all of this up off the top of his head.

This entire ruse made her heart ache as she remembered how Deacon’s lies spewed forth like water from a faucet. This man looked nothing like Deacon -- he had tan arms and a dark, thick mustache. His dark hair was combed over to reveal part of a bald head, and he had a thick scar that sliced across his lip. But he reminded her of the insufferable spy nonetheless.

The small dark-haired synth climbed into the wagon and pressed herself against the wood siding. Miguel came around and helped Nora climb into the wagon. The Buffout and finally left her system and she collapsed awkwardly onto the wooden panels.

She laid on her side in the fetal position and closed her eyes as Miguel pushed the plywood back in place. He began throwing his produce into the wagon and then tossed his supplies in the back. Everything tinkered and rolled around which sounded like the world’s loudest orchestra starring the hoe, sickle, and bushels of corn and tatos.

Still, when the wagon jolted forward, the gentle rocking and the warm body heat of the synth next to her lulled Nora into a deep sleep.

When she awoke, Nora’s back and neck ached from laying in the cramped wagon all night. She whimpered and groaned when the wagon hit a large bump or a pothole. Sometime during the night, the synth woman had been dropped off at either Hangman’s Alley or on the way to the Hub. Nora took the opportunity to stretch out a little to take pressure off her aching body.

The early daylight could be seen through cracks and holes in the plywood. Unfortunately, clods of dirt also fell into her eyes as the wagon jostled violently along the ruined and fragmented roadbed.

The faint glow of Goodneighbor’s neon lights leaked into the wagon’s compartment and Nora had never remembered seeing anything so colorful and vibrant. The lights were breathtakingly beautiful.

Miguel knocked on the metal door loudly and called out to a Neighborhood Watch who was on patrol. “Good evening! I’ve gots some food and equipment for today’s market. I’ve come all the way from Abernathy Farms. Can I rest here for a few hours until the marketplace opens?”

Nora heard the ghoul mumble to someone else and then announce, “What’s in the wagon.”

She pressed herself as close to the bottom of the wagon as she could. More dirt and fertilizer cascaded over Nora’s face and she had to bite her wrist to stifle a cough.

“Like I said, I’ve gots some food and some farming equipment. I hear that Mayor Hancock is trying to start a small garden for yous.”
Nora heard more mumbling and then heard the loud screech of a gate being pushed open. The wagon jostled forward after a moment. A nearby ghoul barked instructions but Nora couldn’t hear what was said.

Her heart thudded loudly against her chest, and she felt like she wanted to puke. Hancock was so close but now Nora couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d push her away once he found out what Ayo did. She was defiled and ruined by that monster. Why would Hancock want that? Or Nick for that matter? Despair and bitter self-hatred clouded her judgement. Nora wouldn’t realize how wrong she was until much later otherwise she would’ve stopped herself from making such a reckless mistake.

Liam’s warning about taking the second capsule of Buffout played back in her head and the depression and self-loathing took ahold of it and clouded her better, more rational mind. After all, if Ayo had indeed ruined her then she’d save Hancock the trouble of letting her down easy, and she’d be doing Nick the favor not having to break it off with her. She didn’t deserve these men. She didn’t deserve to live.

She tipped the second pill into her mouth and swallowed it dry just as Hancock came around the corner and made his way into the empty marketplace.

“Well, well. What do we have here? You that new farm hand from Abernathy?”

Hancock did a lap around the wagon and inspected it’s contents -- nothing but food and assorted farming gear. He did this with every new trader who came through town. It allowed him to keep a close eye on the goods that came and left his city, but it also reminded all of the traders that he was the boss in Goodneighbor and that they shouldn’t fuck with him.

“Yessir.” Miguel replied. “I just came by early to relax a bit before selling my wares and driving ol’ Shelly here back up the road. The brahmin’s left head mooed quietly while the right head shook a flea from it’s head. Blake gives his regards by the way.”

“That’s good. Tell him that I’ll be up his way in a week or so. I’ll bring up some of my good whisky if he’s got some time to sit and chat.”

Hancock eyed the wagon again. There was something that didn’t sit right about it to him.

“Speaking of chatting,” Nora heard Miguel say, “I got some special wears that I heard you’re lookin’ for.”

The ghoul narrowed his eyes and then gestured for Miguel to step towards an alleyway in case someone was eavesdropping on them.

“You found her?” He asked. He didn’t want to give in to the elation right away. Plenty of other traders had tried to take advantage of the reward he was offering for Nora’s safe return.

Miguel nodded and looked a little nervous. “She ain’t in the best of shape but I’ve been in contact with one of them Institute boys. He told me she’d be with this group of four that I’ve been ushering around the place; now I didn’t believe it, but then she climbed out of a manhole like some wasteland gopher and --”

“Bring her here, now.” Hancock snapped. He didn’t care if she escaped the Institute by riding a deathclaw up and out of the Cambridge Crater. He needed to see her no matter what she might do or say in response.
Miguel pulled the tarp off the wagon and quickly brushed the top layer of produce off of the false board. The early dawn and the rush of cool air dispersed the stifling heat that had accumulated in their cramped hiding space.

“End of the line, hon.” He replied and helped Nora clamber out of the wagon. She looked worse than when he had found her outside of the CIT ruins. Her body tried and failed to process the second dose of Buffout. Her nerves and muscles cried in protest as they physically could not produce anymore endorphins or adrenaline to give her the boost in strength. Her entire body trembled and she was breathing heavily. When her feet hit the ground, she collapsed under her own weight and groaned pitifully. She was beginning to feel dizzy and off balance. Her heart was beating out of its chest, it was painful and deafening.

“Hey now, jus’ hold on.” He said. Miguel scooped Nora up in his arms and carried her towards the alleyway. She heard Hancock’s raspy gasps and she tried to still herself against the onslaught of fresh tears. The pill didn’t work quick enough, and now a cold panic was rising inside of her. Nora wanted to live.

“I didn’t find her in this condition.” He said immediately. “She’s gotten worse since I got here, I swear.”

If Hancock wasn’t such astute drug addict then he wouldn’t have believed the man, but Nora’s symptoms -- her dilated pupils, her fast, shallow breathing, and the wet sheen that covered her neck and back with sweat -- screamed that she was in the beginning stages of a drug overdose.

“Oh sunshine,” He whispered. Nora couldn’t stand once she was placed on the ground and she collapsed into Hancock’s arms. He could feel how light she was and then saw an empty vial fall out of her pocket.

His mottled hand snatched it from the dirt. Through process of elimination, he knew the vial held a capsule which left only Mentats and Buffout as the culprits. Overdosing on Mentats was nigh impossible so he assumed that someone had slipped her Buffout. Besides it being a Pre-War drug which the Institute might have used in certain experiments, he could also understand how Nora would gravitate towards a chem that would make her feel like she could take on the world.

“Go get your payment from Ham.” Hancock replied quickly. “Tell him that the full payment is due. That includes a fee for your silence. Nobody must know you brought her here, understand?”

“Yessir,” He replied quickly. “You got her? You need any help?”

“No. Just get outta here.” Hancock barked and scooped Nora up into his arms.

Hancock didn’t watch Miguel turn the corner. He was busy trying to get Nora to say something other than a faint groan or a whimper. He also didn’t see that Miguel walked right past Ham and out Goodneighbor’s metal door as Shelly the Brahmin sat chewing a stray tato that had rolled her way. She’d miss her strange owner who had her traveling all across Northern Boston. Meanwhile Deacon tore off the fake mustache and wiped off the dirt and stage makeup from his face. He took off at a run towards Mercer. Des needed intel and she needed it fast.

Nora awoke several times over the next two days, but it was just long enough to swallow some mouthfuls of hot broth. Still, after nearly half a year of bioengineered food product, the warm broth tasted like ambrosia on her lips.

She heard people talking around her and about her, but she lacked the energy or the gumption to
listen in or give her own opinions to their heated discussion. Occasionally she’d feel someone’s lips against her head, but she shied away from their touch. Ayo’s face wouldn’t leave her thoughts and fresh waves of nausea returned until she retreated further into her own consciousness.

Hancock and Nick, on the other hand, had no idea on what to do. When the ghoul saw Nora. He experienced a moment of pure bliss that no other chem could compare with. But as Miguel brought Nora closer, he spent the next twelve hours fighting tooth and nail to get her to come off the Buffout safely.

Nora thrashed violently and puked up several courses of addictol before he finally got her to keep one in her system. Hancock sent a messenger to get ahold of Nick, but even the synth couldn’t get to Goodneighbor any sooner than that following evening.

She regained consciousness only once when Hancock was flushing the chems from her blood. During the transfusion, Nora wouldn’t look at him but she’d mumble ‘I’m sorry’ over and over again.

When she had no trace of the chem left in her body, Hancock could breathe a little easier, but she still wasn’t out of the woods yet. It wasn’t just the bruises, or the pallor and heavy bags under her eyes, or the significant amount of weight that she lost, but it was that her eyes were vacant and lifeless.

When Nick arrived that evening, he began an examination of his own. He took notice of how the swollen flesh on her eye and cheek reminded him of women who were beaten around by their boyfriends or husbands and then came to him in tears asking for his help to escape the terrible situation that they were in.

He also noticed the dried blood on her hands and her chipped fingernails which told him that she either fought someone off hard or she was using her hands to dig through dirt and rocks. Nick assumed that both might be true.

However, the most damming evidence and the evidence that caused Hancock to hurl a machete into the office door in pure rage was the bruising on Nora’s thighs and genitals. Nick never anticipated that she’d not be wearing underwear beneath her soiled and dirty linen pants. He saw the dirt, blood, and filth and thought she’d be more comfortable and less prone to disease or infection with them off, but then he realized that Nora hadn’t only been beaten around and starved, she had also been raped.

He called on Dr. Amari immediately and pulled the covers up and around Nora’s body. He knew nothing could ever take that pain away from her, but he figured that one less man eyeing up her privates without her express consent was a good first start.

“Nicholas, I need you to gather as much purified water as you can. I’m going to wash Nora’s body and do a full physical examination. Where’s John? He should be here to help.”

Nick frowned. After Hancock threw the machete, he pulled it out of the door and stalked out of the State House. “I think he’s out on a walk.”

Actually the synth had heard something about paying the Combat Zone a visit, but he figured that just this once, the ghoul was allowed to blow off some steam. If Nick ever got his hands on Nora’s rapist, he’d truss the bastard up by his cock and roast his ass over a campfire.

Amari frowned but turned her attention back to Nora. “Make sure you both don’t forget that Nora’s the one who’s hurting the most. You are entitled to your own feelings in this matter, but don’t walk
out on this woman. She needs you both now more than ever before.”

Nick nodded, properly rebuked, and gathered up some purified water before grabbing his coat from the nearby chair. Amari was right. He tied his trenchcoat around his waist and made his way towards the Combat Zone. He’d drag that ghoul back kicking and screaming while high out of his mind, but he’d drag him back nonetheless. He could at least do that for Nora.

When finally Nora awoke, she heard a radio playing softly on a nightstand next to her. The song was “Happy Times” by Bob Crosby. The irony there hurt her more than the throbbing pain in her neck.

“Nora?” A careful voice called out from the darkness, “How are you feeling?”

Crosby’s crooned, Though things may look very dark, your dream is not in vain. For when do you find the rainbow? Only after rain” and she looked away from the woman as much as her neck would allow.

“Turn the radio off.” She whispered.

Amari obeyed immediately and pulled a chair up to Nora’s bedside. Her thin but strong hand gently took Nora’s and she caressed soothing circles on the back of her palm. Nora wondered if Dr. Amari had ever been a mom because she was certainly good at soothing her figurative bruises with maternal care.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Amari asked gently.

“Would it make any difference?” She replied bitterly. “You’ve already examined me -- that much I can tell -- is there anything you need to tell me? Did he give me a disease? Will I always think about him when Nick kisses me? Will I freak out if Hancock starts to use mint flavored toothpaste?”

Amari sighed and brushed the long hair behind Nora’s ear. “He didn’t give you a disease. I’ve tested every STD that I’m capable of testing. As for your last two questions, psychotherapy and regular counseling would help you start to come to terms with what happened.”

Nora scoffed and looked at Amari’s face. Although the room was darkened, someone had nailed blankets up over the windows, Nora knew that she was in Hancock’s bed. If the red, white, and blue comforter wasn’t a dead giveaway, then the Jet canisters lying all over certainly clued her in.

“I think I’m going to need something a little stronger than counseling.” Nora quipped. She almost wanted to ask Amari to pass her one of Hancock’s Jet canisters but then thought better of it. She would’ve preferred a bullet to the head instead.

“Nora.” Amari began carefully. “I’ve seen many women and some men who were victims of rape. Every one of them has overcome it and have lived fulfilling lives. This one event doesn’t define you. Nor should you feel guilty or like you’re somehow to blame.”

“Don’t I know that?” Nora snapped. “I was studying to become a lawyer. I’ve spent time with women who were raped. Being around them doesn’t change anything. I still feel like shit and I still want to die. I still feel broken and I can't fucking put myself back together, and knowing about other women who were raped doesn’t change anything.”

The doctor nodded but Nora cut in before Amari could ask her a follow up question.

“I already know your next question, too.” She began. “You’re going to ask how long I’ve been
contemplating suicide. My answer to you is from the first day I was kidnapped by that courser at Greentech. Before that, it was when I walked out of the vault without my husband, and before that, it was on a Sunday afternoon when my husband was deployed and I took the car out for an afternoon drive.”

“What happened when you took the car out for a drive?” Amari asked gently.

Nora blinked. She was caught off guard by her question but answered her anyway. “I was three months pregnant. I hadn’t told my parents about the pregnancy yet. I wrote a letter to Nate but it sat in my glove compartment until that following week when I asked my Mom to drop the letter in with her makeup orders at the Post Office. I was driving along the Massachusetts Turnpike and got out of my car. Other people were whizzing past me and honking. One man called me a crazy bitch, but I didn’t pay attention to them. I climbed over the concrete railing and then climbed onto the fence. The drop was a good fifty feet straight onto some rocks. I figured that if I belly flopped, I’d take the kid in my stomach out with me.”

“Did anyone approach you? Like Police or a good Samaritan?” Amari asked.

“No. Nobody approached me. I sat on that overpass for a good half an hour until I just got back into my car and drove to my Mom’s house for Sunday night dinner.”

“What stopped you from jumping?”

Nora thought about Amari’s question carefully and then responded. She didn’t have the energy to be bitter. “I figured that causing the death of an innocent fetus that had done nothing wrong was far worse than putting myself out of my misery. Looking back on it now, I ... I would’ve still made the same choice. My son is at fault for a lot of things, but he’s not to blame for his mother’s depression.”

“So you found Shaun, then?” Amari asked. She seemed to perk up at this news. “That’s good news!”

“Nothing about this is good news.” Nora replied bitterly. “Nothing at all. I’m still alive, aren’t I? When I found my son, I realized one undeniable fact: I should’ve died back in that vault.”

Nora wanted to turn her back to Dr. Amari. If she was going to be in chronic physical and mental pain, she would’ve preferred to just wallow in that pain without an audience. Nora never got her wish.

"Well, I realized one undeniable fact too, doll." Nick's voice echoed out from the doorway His arms were folded across his chest and his eyes glinted in the dim room. "You being alive and back here is the most beautiful miracle I've ever seen."

"And..." Hancock's gravel voice said as he appeared on Nick's other side, "you've got tons of people here who ain't gonna let you go dark. Even if you fight us tooth and nail about this, sunshine, you are gonna live. You may be stubborn, but you ain't more stubborn than me. Now's not yer time. I wanna see you grow old and senile."

"We love you, doll." Nick replied. Nora closed her eyes and tried to swallow the hot glow of regret that was stuck in her throat. Then she felt Nick's weight on the edge of the bed. Even though he desperately wanted to he didn't reach out to touch her. "Nora, you've got plenty of people here to lean on when there's too much going on and you think you might drown. Let us help you."

Nora turned away from the three of them anyway. Her shoulders heaved and she sobbed quietly.
Amari patted her arm gently and gave them some space, but Nick and Hancock remained. They remained until Nora stopped crying and fell asleep, and they remained until she woke up plagued by phantom pain and nightmares of Ayo looming over her. They remained even when Desdemona stormed across the Marketplace and demanded to see Nora.
Chapter Notes

Consent is sexy. Consensual cuddles and fluff sooth my heart after several chapters of sadness and pain. More poly negotiations ahead.

Chapter 6 -- Love is Good For The Soul

“What do you mean I can’t see her?” Desdemona argued. Nick blocked the way into Hancock’s office. Both arms were tucked across his chest and he set his face into a permanent scowl.

“She’s not seeing anyone right now.” Nick countered. “She’s recovering.”

“My informant said that she made contact with Patriot. Is that true?”

Nick shrugged, “She’s been unconscious, asleep, or unwilling to talk since she arrived here. We’re in no rush to ask her about what went on in the Institute.”

“Well, is she awake now?” Desdemona’s insistence was starting to get on Nick’s last nerve. “I just want an answer to this one question: who is Patriot? The synths she escaped with are tight-lipped about their savior.”

“How ‘bout we contact you once Nora’s ready to talk. But until then, you’re not getting in to this room.” Nick’s voice sounded reasonable but his tone held a don’t-fuck-with-me-edge that would’ve made Hancock proud.

The woman narrowed her eyes. She wasn’t happy, but she could be patient; after all working as the leader of the Railroad required that she sometimes play the long con, but all of Deacon’s intel in addition to Nora’s rescue meant that they had to strike before their window of opportunity closed.

“I’ll be here for a couple of days.” Desdemona said evenly, “I have to check on PAM and talk with Hancock about setting up some safe houses here in the city. If she’s willing to talk in the meantime, you let me know okay?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be the first one I’ll call.” He replied and went back into the room and locked the door behind him.

Hancock was sitting on a chair near the head of the bed. He was cleaning and sharpening the machete that he brought with him to the Combat Zone. In between Cait’s advertised cage match round with three raiders with razor wire covered bats, Hancock payed Tommy several hundred caps to cut down three lowlifes who were kept just for this purpose -- to be gruesome entertainment.

“Who’s that?” The ghoul asked.

“Desdemona wants to talk to Nora about how she escaped the Institute and who her contact was to get back topside.”

Hancock glanced at Nora’s sleeping form. She was still pale but color was beginning to return a little to her cheeks.
When Nora fell asleep, Amari pulled both of them aside before she left and gave them a list of rules for them to follow to help her recover from her physical and mental injuries. Eliminating stress and addressing her guilt was one of the top priorities and Hancock knew that Desdemona was one helluva stressful person to be around.

“I hope you told her to fuck off.” He growled and locked the machete into an upright safe that also held his shotgun, Nick’s handgun, and his hunting knife. Amari suggested that they discretely clean up any weapons or tools that Nora could use to try and hurt herself, but then Hancock countered that treating her like an infant would only further piss her off and send her down into a hole. They compromised by stashing all of the larger weapons away.

“I told her that in a little less colorful way.” Nick replied and fished a cigarette from his pack. “But she wants to talk with you about setting up some safehouses here in the city.”

Hancock nodded knowingly. His duty as the Mayor still called and using Goodneighbor as location for some safehouse for synths wouldn’t just be an altruistic move, the down-and-out refugees would need jobs and their labor would help bring more caps into his city. If he provided them with a suitable and safe place to stay, then they’d be more likely to spend their eventually-earned caps in the city.

“I’ll go an’ talk to her.” He sighed and stretched his sore back. He tied the white bandage around his leg a little tighter as the stimpack that he took did its slow work at knitting together the muscles and skin. At least being a ghoul meant that scars were never really unsightly, especially since his entire body was scarred and torn up.

“You should probably bring Nora back some food while you’re out.” Nick replied. “At least something more substantial than broth.”

“Sure, sure.” He waved his hand in acknowledgement, “Watch out for her. I’ll be back soon.”

When Hancock left, Nick took his place in the chair by her bedside. As Nora slept, she would sometimes cry out amidst whimpers and panicked groans. Those small noises tore at Nick’s heart.

“Please .... Don’t.” She mumbled first and then she cried out. “STOP!” Her legs kicked around sluggishly as though she was trying to fight off Ayo’s phantom.

“Hey, doll.” He whispered and bent down next to her shoulder. He left the lit cigarette in the ashtray that was next to the bed. “Wake up. You’re having a nightmare.”

Nick’s hand gently touched Nora’s shoulder. She felt cold and slightly clammy. She rolled towards him, halfway between sleep and wakefulness, and Nick got a good look at the large pink scar that crossed the right side of her face. His thumb gently caressed the spot but she flinched back and opened her eyes.

She didn’t scream out or fight him off. But Nick saw how the fear slowly dissipated as she registered where she was and who she was with. The guilt came next and then the disgust and hatred. The cycle was never ending and was seemingly impossible to break.


Nora shivered and swallowed thickly. She groaned a little as she sat up in the bed and picked up Nick’s lit cigarette and took a long drag from the filter. The sweet rush of smoke swirled into her throat and lungs like a comforting breeze and the nicotine cleaned out the sleep-induced cobwebs that clouded her mind.
“I keep dreaming of him Nick.” Nora lamented and put the cigarette back in the ashtray.

“I’m afraid that he’ll never leave me. I killed him with my bare hands, you know. I saw the light in his eyes dim as -- as, “ Nora swallowed thickly. She needed to talk about this dammit. She needed to share her pain with someone. She felt like a pressure cooker that was about to explode unless she let out some of the steam.

“It’s okay, doll.” Nick’s warm, intact hand gently held hers. “You talk about this when you’re ready.”

“What if I’m never ready?” Nora asked. Her eyes met Nick’s and saw that his eyes held nothing but acceptance and understanding for her.

“You never have to be ready.” He replied and shifted his chair a little closer to the bed so his knees touched the patriotic bedspread. “Nobody is expecting anything of you.”

“I’m expecting things from myself!” Nora countered. ‘Dammit! I’m pissed off, Nick. I’m so angry and I don’t know what to do about it. I just -- shit --” Nora rubbed her right temple and massages the tender scar that was there. “Every day that I was in the Institute, I could think of nothing else except how to get back to you. But they used that as leverage too.”

Nora’s throat burned from the cigarette and she took a greedy gulp of purified water that was left on the nightstand before speaking again.

“I’ve done terrible things, Nick. I’ve killed people -- good people -- just because they dangled freedom in front of my face like a carrot on a stick. How can you still be here knowing what I’ve done? It’s no secret that I raised Covenant to the ground. I killed Virgil and I’ve assisted with kidnapping synths and sending them back to that hellhole. How can you still love me after that?”

Nick picked up the remains of his cigarette and puffed on the filter thoughtfully. His brows furrowed and Nora feared that he was actually considering what she was saying. Perhaps he realized that he made the wrong choice. Perhaps her confession was just the push he needed to turn her over to the Neighborhood Watch or the guards back in Diamond City. Of course, Nick did neither of those things.

“Nora, you came from a world that looked at situations as strictly black or white, good or evil. Granted, Pre-War Nick did too. That doesn’t change our moral compass, but sometimes our moral compasses have to be adjusted to match the times. You know that the things you did were wrong, but how would you feel if you knew that those people also did bad things themselves?”

“I’d still feel like shit.” Nora responded bitterly.

Nick nodded as though he expected that response.

“How would you feel if I told you that Covenant was a facade created to lure synths into a hidden underground facility so they could torture them to death in order to find a way to determine who was a synth and who was human?” Nick replied evenly.

“What?”

Nick nodded but he didn’t smile. “When Hancock and I investigated the ruins of the town, we found the survivors hiding out like rats in a sewer grate just across the pond. We found the remains of several Gen-3 synths who were tortured in horrible and brutal ways. When we finally met the deranged Doc, I discovered that one of my missing persons cases was now a murder case. She was
killed because she was a synth.”

“Still,” Nora argued. Although now she understood why Father was so insistent that she go to Covenant, that still didn’t absolve her of the guilt she felt. “That doesn’t excuse what I’ve done. I never wanted to be the Institute’s Angel of Vengeance.”

“Then what about their Angel of Mercy? You subdued that synth Gabriel.”

“I was given direct orders not to kill him.” Nora countered.

“Then what about sparing Hancock, Tinker Tom, or myself at Libertalia.” Nick replied. “I’m sure you were given direct orders to kill us on sight after our run in with you outside of Goodneighbor. Yet you did what was necessary to keep up the ruse. How is that not noble?”

“I head butted Hancock in the face.” Nora exclaimed.

“You’re not the first woman who has done that to him, doll. Nor will you be the last.” Nick replied wryly.

Nora groaned in frustration. She was beginning to see Nick’s point, but her mind wouldn’t give her a reprieve. She’d feel guilty about her actions with the Institute for a long time to come.

“You’d make a helluva defense attorney, you know.” Nora replied. She looked at the synth and grinned a little. Although not a full smile, her grin did wonders to erase the stress and fatigue from her face. The longing that broke through Nick’s chest when he looked at her bordered on being physically painful.

“God, doll. I wanna make you smile more.”

Nora’s grin got wider and a slight flush tinged her cheeks. He recognized that flush in her skin. She had that same look on her face after he kissed her for the first time. Although it happened less than a year ago, to Nick it felt like it happened several lifetimes earlier.

“Nick,” Nora began. The synth noticed her countenance changed. She wouldn’t meet his eyes but it wasn’t out of guilt or self-hatred but rather out of hesitation and embarrassment. “I want you to kiss me.”

He extinguished his spent cigarette and shifted in his seat. After several long months without Nora, there was nothing more in the world that he would rather do. The heat that flushed through his system electrified him unlike any cigarette ever could. But the cold anxiety and fear of pushing her too fast quickly extinguished that fire.

“I would love to, but are you sure you want to? You don’t owe me anything, doll. We can worry about those messy relationship details once you’re more settled in.” God, he didn’t want her to feel obligated, especially not after the trauma she endured.

“Nick, what happened to me doesn’t change how I feel about you.” Nora replied. She shifted slowly in the bed so she was facing Nick. “I haven’t felt your touch in so long.”

“I know, doll but --”

“Now, I’m not saying that I’m ready for us to fall in to bed together, but I -- I miss you.” Nora blushed and bit her lip. She was letting herself be vulnerable and after several months forced to be hard and unfeeling, Still, easing back into her life before the Institute felt strange, like she was an imposter in her own body.
Nick removed his fedora and put it on the nightstand next to the ashtray. He scooted to the edge of his chair and leaned in his face close to Nora’s.

“You take what you want Nora. You lead and I’ll follow, and if it becomes too much all you gotta do is stay stop and I will.” Nick’s irises glowed like two golden halos and Nora felt herself drawn to them like a moth to a flame.

Her lips brushed against his with a feather light touch. She almost couldn’t tell if her lips actually met his or not, but the electricity that jolted through her skin was delightful and familiar. She pressed her lips flush against his and exhaled gently. The kiss was chaste but it felt like home.

When she broke away, she rested her forehead against his.

“How was that?” He rumbled. Nora’s hand reached up to tentatively cup the ruined side of his face. He leaned into her touch and closed his eyes.

“That was alright,” She replied breathily, “but I think I can do better.”

Nora’s second kiss was more urgent. Her tongue grazed across his lips and he parted his mouth and let Nora explore at her own pace. He tasted like she remembered -- like whisky and tobacco -- and she felt the small bubbles of arousal pool in her stomach. She was aroused, yet it was because of her own want and desire which sparked it, not because her body responded naturally to any one touch or intrusion.

She broke away again. Now she wasn’t sure if she could hold off from pulling Nick into bed with her, if only to feel his touch again after so long.

Nick watched her and saw her internal debate written clearly on her face. Her skin was flushed and he knew she was feeling the same heat that made his heart pulse faster. Still, he scooted back from the bed a little but didn’t let go of Nora’s hand.

“You’re beautiful, doll.” He whispered.

She scoffed softly. “No I’m not.”

Her matted hair and odd haircut courtesy of her growing half-shave made Nora feel the exact opposite of beautiful and desirable. She thought she looked odd, she still smelled funky from her week long imprisonment in the Institute’s cell, and she desperately wanted to put some different clothes on.

Nick knew that would be her response. After all, that was often his first response when she paid him a compliment. He smiled. His yellow eyes were the only two pinpricks of light that Nora could see. He looked simultaneously eerie and mesmerizing.

“Nora, what do you see?” He asked gently Both of them needed a distraction. “No judgements just observations.”

Nora rolled her eyes. “Doing that works better for disassociation, not depression.”

“Is that not what you’re experiencing?” Nick countered. “Every time you sleep, you’re back at the Institute. You’re back there with your pain and you can’t differentiate what is real verses what’s merely your demons trying to harm you.”

“Since when did you become a therapist?” Nora asked. Her comment held more bite to it than she intended, but Nick let it roll off his back.
“Since I heard that my girl needed one.” He replied with a grin. “Go on now. Doctor’s orders.”

“I can’t see anything except your glowing yellow eyes.” She complained.

Nick grabbed a couple of lanterns from the floor and lit both of them with a quick strike of a match. Now the room was awash in a soft glow and Nora looked around some more.

“What about now?” He asked.

Nora sat up a little and Nick propped some pillows behind her back and neck to stabilize her. Truthfully, Hancock’s room was disorganized chaos. It looked as though a tornado had passed through.

“This place is pretty messy. But, he’s not as much of a hoarder as you.” Nora began with a smirk.

“No judgements, remember.” Nick gently admonished. “Although in my defense, he’s nearly a third my age. You tend to accumulate a lot of antiques after being alive for so long.”

“You may call them antiques, but I’d call most of this stuff junk.” Nora muttered. Still, she fixed her eyes around the room and took in everything. Hancock’s office was big. Although she had only been here once before -- under far different circumstances and with a far different opinion of the ghoul -- she was mesmerized by the amount of stuff Hancock collected.

“I see a vintage Nuka Cola clock hanging above his filing cabinets. I can’t make out the time, but I’m assuming it’s in the evening. My internal clock’s all messed up since The Institute.” Nora replied.

“Doll, we don’t have to talk about them if you don’t want to. In fact, I asked you to do this to take your mind off them, not to remind you of them.”

“I thought you just did this so you wouldn’t jump my bones.” Nora replied with a smirk.

Nick coughed but smirked at her astute observation. “Well maybe my motives are more complicated than you give me credit for.”

“I’ll never be able to stop thinking about them, Nick.” Nora whispered sadly. “The things that I’ve seen ... The things that I’ve done, they’ll all be with me forever. I can’t change that.”

“I wouldn’t want you to change that” He replied. “But with work, we can move past it.”

Nora snorted. “What fool told you that?”

“She’s no fool. She once suggested that I go see Dr. Amari for my issues. I’d say she’s a pretty smart dame.” he replied and his eyes bore into hers, “And she happens to be a pretty amazing too.”

Nora rolled her eyes at Nick and continued to look around Hancock’s office. “I think I’ve counted twelve Jet canisters. What the hell is Jet anyway?”

“You don’t want to know.” Nick replied grimly. “If he wasn’t a ghoul, his insides would’ve rotted away by now.”

Nora wrinkled her nose at the idea but plucked the red canister up off the nightstand and gave the mouthpiece a cautious sniff.

“It smells earthy but pungent. It kind of reminds me when my family dropped me off at daycare as a child. The place was at a woman’s house and she owned a large cattle farm. In the late summer
or after a really strong rain, the entire pasture would smell kind of like this.”

Nick smirked. “You’re not too far off base, doll. Jet is made from brahmin manure.”

Nora’s eyes got wide as saucers and she looked down at the canister once more before placing it back on the nightstand like it was a bomb that was about to explode. Hancock huffed these things several times a day. “Does Hancock know this?”

“I don’t think he’s too concerned about how the chems are made, only how well they --” Nick poorly imitated the ghoul’s raspy voice, “-- keep reality at bay, ya feel me?.”

Nora’s grin turned into a snicker which grew into a full laugh. God it felt good to laugh again. “That was pretty good! You may give Deacon a run for his money when it comes to imitating people.”

At the mention of the spy’s name, Nora’s face fell. “Did he really not make it out of Greentech?”

Nick’s face looked grim again and he shook his head. “I tried my best to save him. He caught the laser right in his chest. After you vanished, he wasn’t responsive even after I pumped him full of stims. Des and Carrington took his body down to Mercer to bury him. I mean, out of all the Railroad agents, I think Deacon had the right idea. He was a good man. He had a good heart, and he didn’t let himself get too caught up in Des’s idealism.”

“And what about you?” Nora asked. “I saw on the Institute’s surveillance that Hancock and Amari were carrying you out of here.”

Nick winced at the memory of the pain. “Truthfully, I don’t remember all that much. I was pretty banged up, but without Amari or Hancock I don’t think I’d be here today. I may bust his chops from time to time, but he really is a good man too.”

“Aw Nicky,” a gravely voice echoed out as the wooden door squeaked open. “You may be all metal and wires, but you really do care.”

Hancock entered the room with a large platter full of steaming bowls and boxes of assorted snacks. It looked like enough food to feed all three of them and Nora’s stomach rumbled in anticipation.

“Room service is here, sunshine.” He grinned and pulled the card table over towards the bed and set the food on top of it. “For your first course, I gotcha some of Daisy’s special stew. Don’t ask what’s in it, but I can guarantee you it’s some of the best shit you’ll taste while sober.”

He passed her a chipped ceramic serving bowl full of delicious smelling brown gravy. Bits of orange carrots, yellow corn kernels, and tender tatos bobbed around slowly in the thick liquid. She took a tentative lick off the warm spoon and groaned aloud. She ate voraciously and tried to stop every so often so she could savor all of the flavors and so she could give her body a chance to adjust to real food again.

“This stuff is amazing!” She exclaimed and set the bowl aside to drink some water.

Hancock pulled a second chair up and sat next to Nick. Nora looked at both men curiously and saw that their usual male posturing was gone. The synth even passed Hancock his brahmin-shit-filled Jet canister and lit another cigarette for himself.

“This is so weird.” She muttered and Nick cocked his eyebrow up in curiosity.

“What’s that, doll?”
“You both. Six months ago, you both could barely be in the same room together before you both went all alpha male over me.”

“Do you want us to fight over you, sunshine?” Hancock asked. A small, cocky grin toyed at his lips. He was up for the challenge.

“Fuck no!” She exclaimed without hesitation. “That ... That was awful. I hated feeling like I was being pulled in two different directions.”

“Do you still have feelings for Hancock?” Nick asked bluntly. Nora eyed him carefully, unsure how to answer. She wasn’t ready to delve headlong back into that drama again.

“Yes, I do.” She replied evenly. “But I’m still with you, Nick. I love you. Nothing’s gonna change that.”

He nodded as though convinced but then looked at Nora with a peculiar expression.

“What If I want to change that, doll.” When Nick saw the horror on her face, he cursed himself and quickly clarified, “Shit, I didn’t mean it like that. I’m not breaking it off, doll. I mean --”

The synth sighed and took Nora’s hands into both of his. His eyes bore into hers and Nora’s heart thudded with nerves and anticipation. “What if I opened up our relationship to include Hancock. Would you be okay with that?”

Nora blinked dumbly at him. Open up the relationship? She thought, What exactly does that mean?

Hancock spoke up after seeing the unspoken questions on Nora’s face.

“Sunshine,” He began and moved the stew off the quilt so she wouldn’t accidentally upturn it, “What Nicky’s proposing is called a polyamorous relationship. It just simply means that -- if you want -- you can start going with me as well as still being with Nick. This ain’t an either-or deal. You get both of us, if that’s what you want.”

Both of them? Nora was floored. The thought never crossed her mind before now. She didn’t consider herself a prude, but she had never heard of a polyamorous relationship until now. Although the idea was a little cavalier, it didn’t scare her away.

“Can I think about it?” Nora asked. The idea that Nick was okay with her stepping out with Hancock was almost too good to be true.

“Fuck yeah you can!” The ghoul chortled. “You’re the boss. Nothing goes ahead without your say-so. If you’re feelin’ this then we can discuss the particulars later. But there’s no pressure. I’ll be here however you need me.”

“And this was your idea?” She asked Nick who just grinned sheepishly.

“It surprised the hell outta me too, sunshine.” Hancock retorted.

Nora pulled Nick into a kiss. She felt tears of gratitude and happiness prick her eyes but she stilled herself against them. She had shed enough tears to last a lifetime. “I love you Nick.”

“I love you too, doll. There’s no pressure, you know. Whatever you decide, I just want you to be happy.” He rested his forehead against hers and stroked her cheek tenderly.
“Happiness is pretty tricky for me right now” Nora admitted quietly, “but I think I’ll get there eventually.”

“We know you will, sunshine.” Hancock rasped as he watched the two embrace. They were too fuckin’ cute. “We know you will.”

That next day, Hancock forced Nora to go Dr. Amari’s for her first therapy session. She refused and tried to negotiate, but the ghoul finally threatened to carry her over there kicking and screaming if she wouldn’t go willingly.

“Nora would’ya stop!” He exclaimed as she gave him a withering look over another bowl of Daisy’s stew. “Amari ain’t gonna bite ya. Hell, she even offered to let you bathe over there so you weren’t bathing in a building full of strangers.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to go, Hancock. I recognize the merit of therapy. I’ve been in it before! I’m just not ready to talk about all of the shit that went on in the Institute.”

“You don’t have to talk about that. Talk about anything else. Hell, talk about the weather for all I care. I just want you to talk to someone who can help you.”

“I already know how this is gonna go.” She replied. “She’s gonna ask me how I’m doing, and I’m gonna respond with ‘I’m fine.’ Then she’s gonna reply, ‘tell me about that’ and then I’ll be stuck talking about Shaun and the Institute and whatever else she thinks I’m repressing.”

“Well, is there shit you’re repressing?” He replied. He was starting to lose his patience with the woman.

“Of course there is!” She exclaimed. “I’ve had twenty-six years of practice. I’m good at it!”

“Look, this ain’t a torture session, sunshine. Just go. Pretty please! For me.” He pleaded. Nick was so much better at getting Nora to see reason. But Nick was called back to the Agency late last night and now Hancock was the only one around to watch her back.

“Fine.” She exhaled childishly. “I’ll go for you and for that bath that she’s promising.”

“Thank you.” He replied and helped her get a coat on. Daisy had borrowed Nora an assortment of old, warm clothes now that winter was surely upon them.

“I promise it won’t be that bad. D’you want me to stay with you while you’re over there?”

Nora shook her head. Truthfully, she felt bad that she was taking up so much of Hancock’s time. Between caring for her, clearing out the scum from the vacant wearhouses so Des could set up her safe houses, and performing his routine mayoral duties, Hancock was starting to look as ragged as Nora.

“Go take some time for yourself. I’ll be fine.” Nora replied.

Hancock didn’t look too sure but walked with Nora and led her out the back door and out into the cold air.

Commonwealth winters were nowhere near as cold as the November weather she was use to before the bombs fell. By Thanksgiving, Nora was use to seeing a fine layer of snow blanket the ground, but the air still felt like a crisp fall morning.
They walked to The Memory Den in silence. Nora could tell that Hancock was expecting her to run or evade him somehow. Without Nick around to be his backup, the ghoul remained extra vigilant.

“Would you relax.” Nora chastized. “I can feel your tension from here. You’re making me nervous.”

“Sorry.” he muttered. “I feel like Nicky’s gonna castrate me if I let you outta my sight or if you get into trouble.”

“Ah.” Nora nodded in understanding. “So that explains the overly protective parent routine.”

“We both wanna help you get better, sunshine. That’s all.”

Nora opened the door and went into the dimly lit Memory Den. The Silver Shroud radio broadcast leaked through the thin wall. Hancock had told her about the ghoul who broadcasted their re-runs over the radio. He was a simple and a bit strange, but he was harmless.

She paused at the top of the steps and turned back to Hancock. “Look, I’m sorry that I’ve been stubborn. I know you and Nick are just trying to help. I am feeling better and I’m feeling stronger too. But I need to do something. Something that isn’t just therapy. I can’t just hang around waiting for my issues to stop being a problem.”

“Do you have something in mind?” He asked.

“Actually, I was thinking about going back to Sanctuary for a bit.” She replied and watched Hancock’s expression. Thankfully he didn’t seemed phased so Nora continued, “After everything that happened, I just feel the need to go home. There’s a guy there who brought a few people up from Quincy and I’ve let them stay there. I wanna check up on how they’re doing.”

The ghoul nodded. He could sympathize with the need to get out into the Commonwealth and walk around. He had a bit of wanderlust in him too, and staying in one place for too long made him feel antsy in his own skin, Jet use be damned, but couldn’t shake the bad feeling that he had. “How ‘bout we talk about it when you’re done with Amari.”

Nora sighed. “Alright. The discussion is tabled for now.”

“C’mere” He replied and gently pulled Nora into a hug. “I know this ain’t easy for you. I am just happy to see you walkin’ around and breathin’. You scared the shit outta me.”

“I know.” She breathed into his chest. His skin was warm and she turned her head to rest her cheek against his rough skin. She could hear the strong and steady thumping of his heart. “I’ll always be sorry for that.”

Unlike Nick who stood a full head taller than her, Hancock rested his chin into the crook of her neck. She heard him inhale slightly and Nora worried that he was crying, yet when he pulled away his dark eyes were soulful but dry.

He cleared his throat, “I’ll be back here in a bit to get you. Now get yer ass down those stairs, sunshine.”

Nora smirked. Hancock’s words held no edge to them and but she still obeyed anyway. “Don’t miss me too much.”

His dark eyes seemed to shine in the dim light from the heat of his gaze. “Too late for that, sunshine. I already am.”
We Are The Vulnerable Ones

Chapter Notes

Here I go making up lore for characters again. I couldn’t help it. Enjoy the non-cannon backstory for Dr. Amari. Enjoy the New Vegas throwback.

Chapter 7: We Are The Vulnerable Ones

Two coursers dragged their quarry by his arms through the Institute’s atrium. His bound legs flopped uselessly as his bare feet skimmed across the tile floor. The boy’s mop of blond hair hung around his face and his blond tips were tinged a rusty red from his own blood.

Father looked at the spectacle from the observation area in his room with disgust and disappointment. The boy was tied up to a metal post that was erected in the middle of the courtyard. Soon he would await his judgement and receive his punishment. His hands were fastened above his head by metal manacles and his bound feet were chained to the pole’s base. Other synths and scientists refused to look at him. The young man seemed to be invisible to the world.

“Father, your examination is done.” Doctor Volkert said from behind him.

“And what’s the verdict?” He asked without turning around.

“It’s terminal, sir. During the MRI, we found a mass attached to your frontal lobe. It’s a form of aggressive Astrocytoma. The tumor is malignant it’s inoperable; it’s spread through too much of your brain. Performing a partial lobotomy, which is the most common treatment for this type of cancer, would leave you in a vegetative state.”

Father didn’t seem phased by the news. His level blue eyes barely twitched in surprise. “What’s my prognosis?”

“Six months, maybe. A year at most. If you were any other person here, sir, I’d tell them to start getting their affairs in order. But I’m thinking that you want to fight it?”

“No. You thought wrong.” Father watched as the boy struggled against his bonds; his gagged mouth prevented him from calling out for help. “It makes no sense to prolong the inevitable. I trust your diagnosis, if the news is quite grim.”

“Father, please.” the doctor replied. “There’s some experimental drugs that we can try. We can get you a course of chemo started right away. There are other options.”

Father finally turned to the elderly man in the doctor’s uniform. Although the doctor was five years older than Shaun, he still looked healthy and physically strong. Such is the tragedy of illness, Father thought gloomily.

Then he said, “We’ve already exhausted all of the options that wouldn’t render me comatose or put the Institute and our work at an unnecessary risk. I am no fool to fight my mortality. I knew this day would come, I just didn’t think it would come so soon.”
“We have the technology --”

“No.” Father stated firmly. “I appreciate your insistence Doctor, but I’ve made my decision.”

As he made his way towards the staircase that led to the living area, Father could hear the boy’s pained cries as he was savagely beaten with a shock baton. His eyes narrowed imperceptibly. Public lashings were always nasty business but he saw no other alternative to scare his people into obedience. The wasteland was a terrifying and dangerous place and its people were savage and inhuman. Liam may have thought he was saving these synths, but in reality he was leading them to their deaths. Thanks to Nora’s influence, a boy -- a good, intelligent boy -- had been led astray by the ludicrous notion of freedom.

“Father.” A stony-facedcourser said. “The traitor is bound like you asked. Shall I give the order to round up all of the citizens?”

“Yes. Please make the announcement. This will not take long.” he replied.

Father walked into the filling atrium with his jaw set and his eyes locked onto Liam’s struggling body. Although Nora never spoke much about her husband, he did know that his father once served in the military. He had a job with purpose. Old Pre War records showed that he commanded his own squad of men during some long-forgotten war. In a weird way, Shaun secretly hoped that he was making his father proud. He, too, had a job with purpose. He, too, led a group of people toward a common goal. He, too, would have to make a tough decision, consequences be dammed.

Liam stopped struggling when he saw Father approach. By now, the entire atrium was filled with curious and frightened faces. Those who could not fit on the ground floor observed the scene from the living quarter balconies. Several coursers were stationed around the large room to intimidate and to keep order.

Father cleared his throat. His strong voice boomed through the atrium as though he was speaking through a microphone. “Liam Binet. At 2:14AM on November the fifteenth, you were caught using a Stealth Boy to unlawfully to escape the scene of a crime. You not only smuggled out four pieces of highly valuable Institute tech, but you also aided in the escape of an Institute fugitive who was awaiting judgement for manslaughter. Do you deny these charges?”

A courser roughly pulled the white cloth gag from the boy’s mouth.

“No.” He whispered hoarsely.

Father didn’t seem surprised. Instead he turned his back and addressed the crowd. “If you are having similar thoughts as Liam about this silly, ludicrous notion that synths need liberating, I hope you see the path that it will lead you down. Synths do not need liberating. Synths are not people.”

“They are too!” Liam countered. His cries were emphatic and his eyes were emblazoned with passion and fear. “They think, eat, breathe, and have hopes and dreams just like all of us. Just because they are manufactured in a lab doesn’t remove their humanity. Are we not manufactured cell by cell as we grow inside a womb? You, Father, are their father both in name and through genetics. How can you not see that?”

Father scowled. How dare the child use his own words against him. “Let me be clear. I may have created them, but they are not my children. They are tools, a way to redefine mankind through technology rather than biology.”
“Please, sir! See reason!” the boy cried. He spoke quickly but clearly. “When looking at the criteria of sapience in terms of non-human things, self awareness and the ability to think, feel, and reason are paramount. Gen-3 synths are self aware. Gen-3 synths think all the time. They also feel. Eve is a synth and she’s been living with my father and I for the past four years. She’s become like a second mother to me and I know that she feels pain and even guilt or disappointment for what I’ve done.”

“If she feels that, it’s because she was programmed to do it.” Father replied coldly. “But that’s no matter. I’ve heard enough. I will not debate matters of Philosophy with you Liam. While I appreciate your honesty in not denying your crimes, I still find you guilty of treason.”

Father paused and turned back to the boy. “I regret to issue this order, Liam. You were born here. I watched you grow up.”

Liam’s eyes grew wide and he struggled even harder against his bounds as Father issued the command. “And now you will die here.”

“NO!” A voice yelled from the crowd. People mumbled and stirred nervously at the interruption. Dr. Alan Binet shoved his way through the crowd. His thinning dishwater blond hair was damp with sweat.

“Father, please.” He panted. “You can’t do this. My son is only seventeen. He didn’t think about how his actions would affect others. He never meant to hurt anyone or bring shame upon you. My son is an idealist, he sees the world through one lens, but he would never hurt anyone intentionally.” Alan looked at his son with a pained expression.

“Dr. Binet, this is highly irregular.” Father replied coolly. “Your son is of age to make his own decisions. Therefore he is of age to live with the consequence of those decisions.”

“Please!” Alan begged. Pride be dammed. He got down onto his knees in front of Father and begged for his son. “He’s been lost ever since his mother passed. He meant well but he went about it the wrong way.”

“Losing one’s parent does not excuse bad behavior.” Father scolded and then snapped his fingers at a courser who approached Liam with a laser rifle.

“NO.” Alan screamed. “Dammit. If you need your pound of flesh then kill me. I was the one who told him that synth’s could dream. I was the one who filled his head with silly notions about synth equality. Don’t blame the son for the sins of the father.”

Liam struggled against the bonds but his gag was fastened tightly against his mouth. His cerulean eyes were tinged with tears. Still he shook his head and let out a muffled ‘no.’

“You make a compelling argument Dr. Binet.” Father said coldly. “Get up. Stop groveling. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Dr. Binet rose unsteadily to his feet. He was panting and snuffling like a scared child.

Father’s eyes bore into the crowd. “I am not a tyrant. I can grant mercy. However, do not take my mercy as acceptance. Anyone else caught working against the Institute will be harshly punished.

“Dr. Binet return to your lab.” He snapped at the scientist

“What about Liam?” Alan whimpered.
Father looked at the blond boy with disinterest. “X6 please transport Liam out of here. I don’t care where you send him, but he is not to come back.”

Then Father addressed Liam directly. “Liam, you are now an enemy of the Institute. If you try to come back or if you try to work against us in anyway, you will be killed along with the rest of those wasteland heathens.”

Liam’s eyes widened as he realized what was happening. X6 and another courser roughly unshackled his hands and feet but did not remove the gag. He saw his father’s blotchy tear-streamed face and dropped his head in shame. X6 dragged him by the arm towards the center of the atrium. Thecourser said nothing, but his grip was unyielding. Liam saw a crackling blue light swarm around his body, and then he felt a sensation of complete nothingness before he felt a hard, painful impact as he landed facedown in the dirt. X6 was gone as soon immediately afterwards in his own flash of blue light. When Liam looked up, his eyes widened in fear.

Ruined skyscrapers and crumbling buildings sat across a dull grey river. He could hear the cracking of bullets and the muffled shouts of angry, savage people. The air smelled pungent and Liam wrinkled his nose against it.

He ripped the cloth gag out of his mouth with his bound hands and then spit onto the ground. His entire body ached from the shock baton and he panted savagely against the pain and betrayal that rose up from his chest.

He would not cry, he decided. He needed to get his wits about him, so he observed his surroundings again and felt nothing but hopeless despair. The wasteland looked worse than he thought. With effort, he removed the duct tape that bound his hands and feet and then stood up brushing the dirt and God-knows-what-else off his white pants.

He looked back at the ruined white building of the CIT behind him. He didn’t know what he expected to see, whether it was a portal or a wormhole that he could crawl back through and be with his dad and Eve once again, but the ruined marble pillars seemed like an ill omen. He couldn’t go back to them. This was his life now.

He looked around tentatively and made his way towards a broken lift bridge at a fast walk. He had no idea where he was going, nor did he have any weapons or supplies. Who knew what kind of monsters he’d encounter out here. The creepy crawlies that he heard coursers complaining about didn’t scare him as much as the stories about the hulking super mutants or the chem-crazed raiders. Bugs and animals were one thing, but humans often proved to be more nefarious and dangerous than any other species -- mutated or not.

He could see the faint glow of bright floodlights off in the distance and set off towards it. If he could at least find some people who were friendly, perhaps they’d be able to help him get his bearings. Or so he hoped.

“So how do you feel?” Amari asked when Nora emerged from the bathroom dressed in some clean, warm clothes.

“Much better now actually.” Nora replied and tentatively perched on a plastic chair. It was actually the truth. The bath was warm and Nora felt reasonably safe to fully disrobe and let the heat soothe her sore muscles and aching neck.

When she was in the bath, she tentatively ran her fingers along the fading bruises on her thighs willing herself to feel her own touch. She didn’t fully explore her body despite the heat that pooled
in her stomach. She merely explored the areas like a scientist would and just took note of what felt tender or painful and what felt good. Of course, the exploration didn’t leave her any more physically satisfied but it calmed her mentally and reminded herself that she was in control of her own body.

Even though the Institute had first-rate indoor plumbing, Nora preferred lying there and just listening to the ambient sounds rather than the whirl of a sterile filtration system. She could hear Irma humming some sultry song that was probably one of Magnolia’s originals at one point. She heard the old triumphant theme to the Silver Shroud radio broadcast, and she could hear the gentle tip tapping of a keyboard as Amari worked on God knows what.

Of course, she knew she would have to face the music sometime and so she forced herself to sit down across from Amari for her therapy session. She braced herself for the worst including the onslaught of cliche but non-threatening questions, but instead, Amari passed Nora a Nuka Cola and grabbed one for herself. The bottle felt cool to the touch like it had been sitting outside in the November air.

Nora twisted the bottle cap off the top and looked at the red and white embossed logo on the piece of metal before slipping it into her pocket. In a world where bottle caps were the currency, she wondered if going over to a bar for a soda was akin to finding a penny on the ground.

The bottle itself felt heavy in her hands. The glass was thick and the Nuka Cola logo was molded into the bottle’s side. Even when so much had changed in 200 years, there were some small comforts in seeing something so familiar. She smiled at the memory which made Amari smile too.

“Is there a private joke that I’m missing?” Amari asked gently.

“No, not really.” She replied. “It’s just that my father use to collect Nuka Cola merchandise. He’d be the first one to buy the new flavors and try them. He had a refrigerator in his garage and we’d share a soda as he worked on his vintage fusion car. He even took me to Nuka World when I was a little kid. It was just a father-daughter trip, but I think he had more fun there than I did.”

Nora rarely let her thoughts turn to her own parents. After losing Nate and Shaun, Nora couldn’t bare to think about any family or extended family who undoubtably met their end when the bombs fell. She shook her head vigorously as though she was trying to shake the memories away.

“It’s okay to let yourself feel pain, Nora.” Amari replied gently. “There’s no shame in it.”

She frowned. “So are we beginning the therapy session? Is this where I tell you about my parents or about my childhood?”

“No,” Amari replied with a small secretive smile. “This is where I tell you about mine.”

Nora sat back in the chair and shot the woman a skeptical expression. Amari picked up on that and replied, “Don’t worry. I will try to make it a short story. You say your father collected Nuka Cola, well back when I was a young girl, collecting Sarsaparilla Star bottle caps was all the rage.”

Nora vaguely remembered that name. “Sarsaparilla? Like Sunset Sarsaparilla? Wasn’t that out on the west coast?” She remembered that her Aunt Vicky from San Diego came East to visit one Christmas and brought Nora a six pack of the stuff. She didn’t like it very much but was too polite to say so.

“Indeed.” Amari said and took a small sip from the head of the heavy glass bottle. “I grew up in a small community on the outskirts of New Vegas.”
“You mean Las Vegas.” Nora interrupted.

“It hasn’t been called that in a long time. Locals call the Las Vegas ruins New Vegas and they call the surrounding desert the Mojave Wasteland.” She replied patiently.

“If you’re from there, then why are you here? No offense.” Nora added hastily.

“None taken.” Amari replied. “But before I tell you why I came to Boston, I first would like to know if you have ever heard of The Followers of the Apocalypse?”

Nora shook her head then took a drink of the heavy, cool bottle. The 200 year old soda still tasted as she remembered it. While the carbonation wasn’t as crisp as it once was, the sugary sweet syrup taste reminded her of picnic lunches and baseball games.

“The Followers of the Apocalypse started a while back.” Amari began, “After the bombs fell, a group of survivors decided to band together to help their fellow human instead of kill them. The Followers made it their mission to collect as much Pre-War knowledge as they could so they could use that knowledge to help others. My parents were members, as were my grandparents, and we grew up in the community and were taught the Old World knowledge of history, medicine, technology, and science.”

Then how did you make it to Boston?” Nora asked. “Walking coast-to-coast would take forever.”

“Indeed.” Amari agreed. “But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. First, I want to share with you the reason why I left the Followers.”

“I started suspecting something wasn’t quite right with my family around the age of nine.” She continued, “Both of my parents had fiery red hair and blue eyes. My brother Mikah looked just like them. However, I did not. When I asked my parents about it, they were evasive and assured me that I was their daughter. I wasn’t satisfied. My peers would often tease me and call me a courier's child because I was the figurative and literal black sheep in the family. I tried to let the matter die but I couldn’t.”

Nora could already guess where this story was going but she politely let Amari finish.

“Although the Followers have access to one of the largest intact libraries in the west, they also keep detailed records of lineage, some dating all the way back to Pre War times. When I looked up my family in the database, I discovered that my name was not listed anywhere. Mikah was registered to a Mr and Mrs Joseph and Teri Amari as their son, but I was not there. When I confronted my parents, they finally broke down and confessed that I was their adoptive daughter.”

Amari took another drink of soda and then cleared her throat. “It took two more years of begging and pleading with my parents to reveal who my birth parents were. On my thirteenth birthday, my father gave me one gift. It was a note tucked inside a small, coarsely woven blanket. The note had just one name: William Calhoun.”

Nora frowned and shook her head. “Is that name suppose to mean anything to me?”

“No, of course not.” Amari replied. “Unless you have a knowledge of Followers history or a fascination with current events in the Mojave Desert, the name means nothing to you. But thanks to my biological father and the efforts of a few others, the Mojave Desert will be forever plagued with the worst type of people imaginable.”

Dr. Amari rose from her seat and grabbed a thick book from the top of a filing cabinet. The book had no title but she pulled a black and white photograph from its pages. The photo depicted three
men. The man on the far left had the same dark hair, thin eyes, and upturned lips as Dr. Amari. His dark eyes betrayed a look of unease. The man in the middle with startling blond-white hair had a cocky, overconfident smile but his face looked cruel. The man on the far right was the most jovial of the three. He was wearing a wide-brimmed cowboy hat and his short brown hair poked out like weeds growing in the cracks of concrete. The man had a bible in his right hand and a high caliber pistol in the other.

“Who are the other two men?” Nora asked.

“The man in the middle is Edward Sallow but now he only goes by the name of Caesar.” Amari replied. “The man on the right is Joshua Graham. According to my father’s journal, he was a missionary for a group called the Mormons and he was in Arizona trying to convert people to his religion.”

Nora’s eyes didn’t leave the man in the middle. She knew she was projecting but the white hair and the striking blue eyes reminded her too much of Father.

“Why did he go by the name of Caesar?” Nora asked. “Wasn’t Caesar a Roman general or something?”

“According to the history books, he was a politician, general, and dictator.” Amari confirmed. “With his power, he ended the Roman Republic and brought about the beginning of the Roman Empire. According to my father’s journal, Edward took the name of Caesar after he led the Blackfoot tribe to victory against their enemies. He had a dream of one day creating the same empire that Caesar had, but this time his empire would spread throughout the western United States. The man on the right, the missionary, became Caesar’s Malpais Legate. However, rumors have said that Joshua somehow displeased during an important battle Caesar and was executed. My father was offered a high-ranking position as one of Caesar’s military strategists but he turned it down.”

“That was a brave thing for your father to do.” Nora replied.

“Brave, yes. But not without consequences.” Amari responded. “He refused. Not out of altruism but out of spite for Edward. A year into their journey east, the three men and the Followers who went with them were kidnapped by the Blackfoot tribe. Edward taught the Blackfoot people warfare while Joshua taught them about his God. My father’s skills were less applicable. He was a scholar and a historian. He went to record the Blackfoot tribe’s stories and legends. As a result, he assimilated into their culture. He took a wife who became pregnant with me. But Edward never thought of the Blackfoot people as equals. To him, they were savages. He enslaved the tribe, but my father did nothing to stop him. When Edward discovered that my mother had given birth to ‘a half-blood bastard,’ he had my mother crucified. He then gave my father a choice. He could leave with me at the expense of the rest of the Followers’ lives, or he could give me up to be thrown into a gorge and retain his position as his third-in-command.”

“Obviously your father choice to keep you,” Nora replied, “but what happened to the Followers that your father consequently damned?”

“They were covered in pitch and set on fire.” Amari whispered hauntingly. Her dark eyes seemed vacant as she grasped the journal in her hands. “My father writes that he could hear their cries for miles and he could smell their bodies for miles after that.”

“That’s awful!” Nora exclaimed. “And you found all of this out when you were thirteen?”

Amari nodded. “My parents tried to shelter me from the truth but in the end they decided that
discovering the truth -- even in all of it’s terrible honesty -- was better than creating a nice lie.”

“What happened to your birth father when he brought you to the Followers?” Nora asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’ll ever know. He left me on the steps of the Los Angeles Public Library wrapped in a blanket and with this journal laying beneath me. I’ve read through this book so many times that I can recite passages of it by heart, but I will never know why he left. I can only speculate that my existence reminded him of his past sins.”

“So is that why you came East? To escape Caesar?” Nora asked.

“Not just to escape Caesar, but to escape my father’s tarnished legacy.” She replied. “It took me nearly five years to get to Boston. I nearly died several times along the way, and a couple of times I considered letting the wasteland take me. The journey was incredibly treacherous, but I felt like I owed it to myself somehow; if my mother could survive in the wilds of Arizona then maybe I could survive the next day and then the next no matter how bad life got for me.”

Nora sighed and drained the rest of the Nuka Cola from the bottle. She could see what Amari was trying to do. By telling Nora about her own life, she could make parallels to what Nora was experiencing and humanize her experiences with the Institute. Except the Father was nothing like this Caesar. Her son may be a dictator, he may be selfish, he may only care about the Institute’s progress, but he wasn’t a murderer.”

“Dr. Amari, I appreciate you telling me this story, but I don’t see how this will help me. You fought for your life and you fought to make it here to Boston. I was frozen in a Vault and my megalomaniacal son just happened to let me out one day when he was feeling bored. I only made it to the Institute through sheer accident, and I only made it out because I had help.”

The doctor shook her head. “Nora, what stopped you from killing yourself when you were in the Institute?”

Nora responded automatically. She tried and failed to clear away the lump forming in her throat. “Seeing Nick and Hancock again.”

“And what stopped you from killing yourself outside of Vault 111?”

“Nate’s memory and his faith in me that I am better than my flaws.” Now the tears flowed freely and Nora didn’t bother to wipe them away.

“And what stopped you from jumping off that overpass?”

“Shaun.” Nora swallowed thickly. Her face burned at the memory. “My baby.”

“No, Nora.” Dr. Amari replied. “I disagree with you on all three of those accounts. You survived thanks to yourself. You made the choice in all three instances. There may have been other motivators, yes, but you decided to live. For whatever reasons you had, you decided to go on living another day. Despite the pain. Despite your problems. Nobody can take that away from you, Nora.”

She looked at Dr. Amari and clenched her teeth against the lies that threatened to break from her throat. Deep down she knew that Amari was right but her demons wouldn’t give up without a fight.

“You’re wrong.” She choked out. “The night I was rescued from the Institute, I tried to overdose on Buffout.”
“I know Nora. I was there.”

“And Hancock saved me.” Nora whispered and sat down heavily in the chair. “And I didn’t deserve it.”

Amari knelt next to her and took Nora’s hands into hers. “Why? Why do you think that? What could possibly make you so unworthy of life?”

Nora thought about her question. In a world where murder and other horrible atrocities were common place, did she really think that raiders, that Dr. Ayo, or even that Caesar deserved life more than she did?

“Nora. Do you want to live?” Amari asked.

“Yes.” She replied quietly. It was the truth. Nora was pleased that it was the truth.


“For Nick and Hancock.” She replied automatically but she then she added, “And to somehow stop my son from destroying his last shreds of humanity.”

“Great! Then focus on that.” Amari patted her arm consolingly.

Nora cocked an eyebrow at her. “And here I thought you were going to tell me to live because that’s what I should want.”

“I think you’ll get there.” Amari replied with a small smile. “For now though, just focus on the next destination. Focus on your next goal. Even if it takes you months or years, know that healing isn’t a quick process. Don’t give up on yourself Nora. None of us are giving up on you.”

Nora shifted uncomfortably. “Okay.” She replied quietly. “Am I done here?”

“Yes. But know you are always welcome back here. I promise that we’ll talk less about me next time.” The doctor rose to her feet and put the thick leather journal back onto the filing cabinet.

Nora rose from the chair and rubbed her back. Dr. Amari said no more to her and turned her focus back to her computer terminal.

“Go on.” She replied without looking at Nora. “John is waiting for you.”

Nora felt awkward climbing the wooden stairs. As she slowly ascended, she could hear another radio broadcast echo out from behind a closed door. Irma, the Memory Den proprietor was nowhere to be found, but she saw Hancock sitting on a vacant chaise smoking a cigarette and leafing through what looked to be a half-burnt vintage burlesque magazine from the early 1940s. He dropped the article as though it had burned him when he heard Nora’s footsteps come up the stairs and rose to his feet when he saw Nora.

“Hey sunshine. How was your talk with --”

Nora crossed the room quickly and pulled him into a tight hug. She held tightly onto his warm body and snaked her hands underneath his long jacket. His body felt rough and solid beneath hers and it felt like she was hugging a piece of coarse rock. She buried her face into his chest and just sat there for a moment.

“Hey now, sunshine. You okay?” Hancock asked and tried to gently pull away.
Her response came out as a kiss. Although brief, her kiss was searing and hot. Her lips seemed to tingle against his and he enjoyed the sweet aftertaste of Nuka Cola.

She broke away gently but didn’t let go of him. Her cheeks were blotchy but her green eyes were captivating in the dim light.

“I ain’t complainin’ but to what do I owe the pleasure?” He rumbled.

“I just wanted to say thank you.” She replied. “For not giving up on me.”

He rumbled deep in his chest and it sounded like a noise only a yao gui could make. Nora found the sound strangely comforting.

“I could never give up on ya, sunshine.” He replied and placed his lips gently against her forehead. Nora tilted her head up and brushed her lips against his again.

Hancock tasted her again and let his hands gently run along the length of her body before stopping at her hips. He wanted to go farther, God did he ever, but he also didn’t want to scare Nora away.

“I think we should take this elsewhere.” He growled into her neck. His heart was beating almost too loudly to hear himself think. “Irma ain’t too fond of PDA when she can’t be apart of it.”

“Back to your room then?” Nora whispered cautiously. But there was hope and heat in her eyes that made Hancock’s blood pulse in his veins.

“Not just yet, sunshine.” He whispered. “There ain’t no rush. I’m takin’ you on a proper date and all that shit.”

Nora smirked. “Really? I’d say Nick is being a bad influence on you.”

“I’d say you were right, sunshine.” He chuckled. “’C’mon now. Give me a little credit. I’ve been spendin’ all morning on this.”

“Really?” She asked.

“What?” Hancock frowned slightly.

“You never struck me as the wine and roses type of guy.” Nora replied.

“Who said anything about wine and roses?” He chuckled and gently pulled Nora to the door. “This is gonna be so much better than that. Just have an open mind, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.” Nora chuckled and let Hancock lead her out into the cool midmorning air. His rough hand felt warm against hers and she couldn’t wait for whatever Hancock had planned.

Virgil heaved his sweaty, exhausted, and blood-stained body up the earthen hill outside of a small homestead. The owner there called the place Aberford? No that wasn’t right. No, Virgil remembered, it was Abernathy, and out of all the places he passed by, these few men and women were by far the most amiable.

Although they still treated him with distrust, the farm’s proprietor Blake showed him some small mercy.

“Hoh boy there,” he said upon observing the bloodstained bandage around his eye and the torn clothes that barely preserved any modesty, “you don’t look too good, pal. Why don’t ya sit down a
spell. My wife will getcha some water.”

“T-thank you.” Virgil croaked. His chapped lips cracked painfully just forming those two words and his throat felt inflamed. “D-do you have a doctor’s bag? I could r-r-really use some antibiotics.”

Blake looked at the man nervously. Sickness was a serious deal out in the Commonwealth. Not only could germs spread quickly, but most people couldn’t afford to get laid up by the case of the flu or a bad head cold, at least not when their survival and livelihood depended on being able to work so they could eat.

“You just stay right there. I’ll see what we have, but it’s probably not much.” Virgil nodded and sat down on a large rock. The day was quite chilly despite the sun hanging directly overhead and his tattered clothes did little to protect his skin from the cold.

Despite the dangerous and long trek out of The Glowing Sea, Virgil still stopped once in a while to jot down notes on his condition. He managed to make it out of the worst of the radiation without even succumbing to radiation sickness. He immediately wanted to draw blood so he could test it but realized that the scientific equipment that he smuggled out of the Institute got destroyed in whatever fight his Super Mutant self got mixed up in.

Still, it wasn’t until he reached a derelict old farming co-op that the cold started to creep into his skin. Even before that, he felt remarkably well considering he was missing an eye, had broken some ribs, and had his entire back cut to pieces by the broken glass from his chemistry station.

He had several hypothesis forming about how the FEV’s effects augmented his own genome even after the appropriate vaccine was administered, but all required further testing with equipment that he simply did not have. Still, he kept the small, white ammo box close to him at all times. The two syringes full of his serum held the most important work that he has ever done.

Blake cleared his throat which broke Virgil from his thoughts, “My wife Connie said we have some extra purified water and some tatos that we can spare. I also found some of my old clothes. They’re just as threadbare as your rags, but at least these will prevent you from freezing your balls off.”

He tossed Virgil some dark trousers and a long, wool button up overshirt. He was right about the material being threadbare, but at least it was marginally warmer than his current clothes.

Blake dug around in the front pocket of his thick coveralls and then said, “Unfortunately, we’re all outta antibiotics but we got some herbal anti-antimi--” he struggled over the pronunciation awkwardly.

“Antimicrobial?” Virgil finished for him.

“Yeah! That’s the stuff.” he replied. “We got it from a trader when he passed through from Goodneighbor. I mean, if it comes from Goodneighbor you can be sure it’s some good shit.”

Virgil accepted the small tin politely but had no intention of using the home-brewed salve. He knew that the throbbing pain in his head and his flushed skin was the results of the FEV fighting to leave his body, and the hot itching pain that he felt over his injuries was the possibility of a bacterial infection setting in. No, he needed proper medical care sooner rather than later.

“D’you know of a doctor around here? I’ve been badly injured and I think infection is setting in.”

Blake frowned. The man in front of him certainly looked like he had clawed his way out of Hell just to get there. “The closest one I know of is in Diamond City but that’s about a half-a-day’s
walk from the direction you came. If you stick to the road you’ll be relatively safe but, and forgive me for sayin’ this, it might be easier on you in the long run to just put a bullet in your own head. If the mongrel dogs don’t get you, the raiders sure as hell will.”

Virgil struggled to his feet and hoisted his bag onto his shoulder. His lips cracked again when he spoke and so he spoke slowly and stilted. “In case I don’t choose suicide as an option, do you know of a place I can go?”

Blake shrugged. “There’s a place over the hill. Just up past that ol’ gas station. It’s called Sanctuary Hills and they’re doin’ a mighty fine job settin’ up a settlement. There’s only a handful of them, but maybe they can help you or at least give you a place to rest up before you decide what your next move is gonna be.”

The scientist nodded and grunted in thanks. As Blake walked back down the hill towards his farm, Virgil stripped quickly and pulled on the new set of clothes. He left his shredded Institute suit in a pile of rags and buried it in a shallow hole. It made no sense to walk around wearing the last remnants of his old life. No, if Virgil managed to survive in this new, God-forsaken world then he’d bury his past with the Institute for good.
I apologize about the long wait. Initially I blame the start of school, but then my personal life exploded and I had a variety of things to deal with first. This chapter went through several re-writes before I could get it close to something worth while. Thank you for your patience. Reviews, feedback, and kudos are always appreciated. :) 

“Hancock, where are we going?”

The ghoul’s warm, rough hand gently pulled her through the thick crowd that had gathered in the courtyard outside the Old State House. Almost all of the women (and some of the men) shot Nora jealous glances.

“How long ya gonna be with this one, Mayor?” A ghoul rasped off to Nora’s left.

“Ya better be good to him, honey.” Another voice called out from the crowd.

Nora glanced at Hancock; the muscles in his jaw clenched tightly against his irritation and his coal eyes narrowed in concentration and in defiance.

He rapped twice on a red wooden door. They were outside a store called Daisy’s Discounts and it looked closed.

Nora felt the eyes on her back. Her neck felt warm and she felt the small hairs on her neck stand up in anticipation of a fight. A man to their left was smoking a cigarette, but his hand was resting on the gun at his hip. Sure, Goodneighbor was a town that was rough around the edges, but Nora never anticipated that she’d feel unsafe while standing next to the Mayor of the town.

“Hancock, why don’t we go ba—“

Just then, the door cracked open. The figure inside let out a raspy chuckle and then its mottled hand grabbed Hancock by the lapels of his jacket and pulled him and Nora inside.

“Oh John, you really stepped in it this time, didn’t ya?” The figure rumbled.

From what Nora could tell, the figure was slightly shorter than she was, and she had the silhouette of a middle-aged woman.

“Jesus, Daisy. Ya hungover or something? Why’s it so dark in here?” Hancock rasped.

“It’s dark cuz I’m hidin’ from those urchins out there.” Daisy rasped and set out a few candles on the countertop, vacant bar stool, and wooden table.

She struck a match on a small wooden matchbox and lit them. “John, ever since you’ve taken up with the girl, I got people knockin’ on my door all the god damned time askin’ for information. They know she’s somehow connected to the Institute. People are on high alert after you had your boy go crow huntin’. There’s people talking about —“
“Daisy, Daisy, Daisy.” Hancock interrupted quickly. “Let’s not bore Nora about them trivial political details. I brought her to you for a reason, sister.”

Nora gave Hancock a suspicious look; he was hiding something and Nora didn’t like that he was concealing information. The ghoul returned her look with a gentle smile. That smile said “trust me” but for good measure, he mouthed “we’ll talk later.”

In the warm candlelight, Nora saw that Daisy had windswept ashen brown hair piled neatly into a tight bun. She was dressed in dusty travelers clothes and looked delicate with her petite build. Despite being a ghoul of who-knows-how-old, she walked around the room with the poise of a young hostess: full of self assurance and confidence.

“So you’re Nora, huh?” Daisy replied and unabashedly gave Nora a once-over. “I can definitely see what all the fuss is about. I haven’t seen a smoothskin as beautiful as you since the bombs fell.”

“Um, thanks.” Nora replied. With her unevenly cropped haircut, the anemic pallor of her skin beneath the candlelight, and the bruises and cuts that still marred her body, Nora didn’t feel beautiful at all, but she tried to take the compliment in stride.

Nevertheless, Hancock nearly beamed at Daisy’s approval of Nora and pulled out a small suede bag the size of an apple and tossed it to the ghoul. “Sunshine here is gonna need some new threads. Get her the works. If we’re gonna go out on the town, then we gotta be sure them Institute fucks can’t find her.”

“Or the other fucks either.” Daisy mumbled which earned her a heated glare from Hancock.

“Why aren’t we staying in Goodneighbor?” Nora asked. She was going to get down to the bottom of this intrigue. “I wouldn’t mind visiting the Third Rail again.”

Hancock glowered but said nothing. He picked at a stray thread in his jacket sleeve until Daisy interjected.

“Oh doll, you can’t go on a proper date in Goodneighbor! John’s a great Mayor and all, but when a man wants to take you out with all the bells and whistles, you don’t say ‘no.’”

Daisy led her into the next room and shot the ghoul a wink. “John, why don’t you busy yourself for a while. Nora’s the first Pre-War woman I’ve run into in a long time. We’re gonna have us some girl talk first before we get down to the nitty gritty. Don’t worry, I’ll have your woman lookin’ like a million bucks by the time you come back.”

“I’ll be back in one hour, sunshine.” Hancock rumbled and gave her a small smile from over Daisy’s slight shoulders. “Oh and fit her with a gun, Daisy. I don’t anticipate there’s gonna be trouble, but I ain’t stupid either.”

“Hancock, wait.” Nora called out. The ghoul gave her a pleading look that said, We’ll talk later. I promise.

“Don’t you worry, dollface.” Daisy rasped and closed the door behind her with a soft thump. “John will be back in a jiffy. You’ll be safe with me.”

Nora suddenly felt uneasy. She was trapped in a strange woman’s home, Hancock was gone, and she didn’t know this Daisy from Adam. Could she even be trusted? What if she was working with the Institute somehow? Panic and paranoia crept in but it was soon dispelled by a warm, comforting smile.
“Relax, hon. You’re tremblin’ like a leaf in a hurricane. I’m not gonna hurt ya.” As though to offer a sense of good-will, Daisy didn’t try to approach Nora. Instead, she put two chipped ceramic coffee cups down on the table.

“Coffee?”

Nora’s eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets. “Where did you get coffee?”

Daisy smirked, “The Mayor may peddle chems, but I’ve got the Pre-War market locked down. I have a friend who lives up in the Slog. She grows and roasts her own as a side project and I buy it wholesale from her. This stuff runs traders almost 250 caps per cup, but it would be in poor taste of me to charge you. Us Pre-War gals gotta look out for each other.”

The woman handed Nora a cup and poured one for herself. Nora sniffed the warm liquid tentatively and smelled the bitter, rich aroma of black coffee. She took a sip and sighed in satisfaction.

“Thank you, Daisy. I haven’t had coffee in nearly —“

— “200 years?” Daisy chuckled.

“Something like that.” Nora smirked and she took another sip of the warm liquid.

“So, word on the street says you’re a victim of one of them Vault Tec experiments. Mind me askin’ what happened? I gotta say, for a woman as old as I am, you’re lookin’ pretty damn good.”

“It’s kind of a long story.” She sighed. It was a story that she thought she had buried. When would she stop being known as Nora the Vault Dweller and as Nora … just Nora?. The ghoul picked up on her reluctance and tactfully changed the subject.

“It’s alright, you ain’t gotta tell me anything if ya don’t want to.” Daisy rasped. Her voice sounded rougher and harsher than Hancock’s, but it held a quiet commanding strength that few could ignore. “God knows that life after the bombs fell was a complete and utter shitshow.”

“I figured it was tough,” Nora replied judicially, “so I guess that’s one small favor that I got by being cryogenically frozen.”

Daisy smirked, wryly and humorously. “Thank God for small favors, girl. You weren’t there to see the great city of Boston tear itself to pieces. That’s somethin’ I’d pay thousands of caps to forget.”

“What happened?” Nora asked and then added, “If you don’t mind me prying.”

Daisy let out a cackle, “This ain’t exactly a story to have over coffee, but if you insist I don’t mind sharing.”

“I insist.” Nora replied and took another sip of her coffee.

Daisy leaned back against the peeling robin's egg blue countertop and sighed wistfully. Her eyes held a far away look as she tried to remember everything that happened on that fateful day.

“I was a nineteen year old, starry eyed, naive, girl who worked full time at the Boston Public Library. I had dreams of owning my own bookstore one day, but I got into it bad with a boy named Mikey Lewis. I got myself knocked up and Mikey split as soon as I told him. I was pretty well along when the bombs fell. The library had a small bunker attached to the subway system for their workers. Me and the rest of the shmucks went downstairs once they made the broadcast and we stayed down there for nearly two weeks.”

Daisy shrugged and took another sip of her coffee. “During the first couple of days, we were too scared to be hungry. But when it did hit us, it hit some stronger than others. I could hold off on the hunger, but my coworkers couldn’t. They jumped on the janitor before he knew what was happening. He was only a pile of bones by the time they were done.”

Nora thought about the feral ghouls that she and Hancock had encountered in the Glowing Sea. Their emaciated bodies, half-naked and rotted away, constantly searched for food. Nora wondered if Daisy’s cannibalistic coworker came to a similar fate.

“How did they not kill you too?” Nora asked.

“I grew up in a rough part of the city, sweetheart. Ya really think I wasn’t packing heat?”

She smirked. Now Nora could see why Hancock liked her.

“So after the first week, all our hair fell out. Troy lost a couple toes and an ear and Mabel was the first to lose her nose. I half expected to lose the baby first, but I didn’t. Not that week at least.”

Nora looked at Daisy in shock. “You turned ghoul while you were still pregnant?”

“Yes.” Daisy replied. Her blasé tone felt hollow and she tried to disguise the hitch in her voice with a rasping cough. “By the second week, I was outta my mind in pain. Labor pains were nothin’ compared to your skin peeling off you in long, bloody sheets. I passed out there for a while, but when I came to I was lying in a pool of my own blood and I had delivered my baby.”

“Did your baby survive?” Nora asked, her half-consumed cup of coffee was completely forgotten. Before Daisy could respond, Nora felt foolish with how juvenile and naive her question was.

“No. She died. She was stillborn. She didn’t even draw a breath. I’m actually pretty grateful for that, I guess. Of the twelve of us, only three of us survived. Troy was our lead custodian and so he helped me buried her down there. We dug a grave next to the subway tracks once we felt strong enough to leave the bunker.”

“Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“Nah, don’t be. She wouldn’t live very long if she had survived. Raiders, scavvers, and other scum would’ve found her and would’ve given her a long, painful death. Her dying was a mercy really.”

Nora frowned at the ghoul’s hardened attitude. She couldn’t be reproachful, after all, Daisy didn’t have a choice in the matter about whether her baby survived, but she didn’t like how this new world forced women — good women — to be harsh to survive.

“What about you, hon. Where’s your kid?”

“He’s dead too.” Nora’s response was automatic and unfeeling. She answered quickly but still didn’t want to take her answer back. Shaun was dead to her. She promised herself that.

Daisy cleared her throat, drew out a small metal flask from her jacket pocket, and splashed a finger full of amber liquid into each of their mugs.

She held hers up to Nora and toasted, “Well, here’s to our dead kids. Cheers, girl.”

Nora nodded and drained the chipped cup quickly. The alcohol and the caffeine simultaneously
electrified and soothed her.

“To Shaun and …”

“Rose.” Daisy cut in. Her onyx eyes bored sorrowfully into Nora’s. “Her name was Rose.”

An unsteady and morose silence fell between them. Daisy then sighed and stretched languidly in her chair.

“Oh man, when you’re as old as I am, you get stiff just standin’ still.” She groaned. “So, how ‘bout we take a look-see through my closets and get ya set up for your date tonight.”

“Will you tell me what’s going on, first?” Nora asked. “Why does the entire town look at me like I’m some —“

Nora’s words failed her but Daisy finished the sentence for her. “Like you’re a piece of meat?”

“Yeah.” Nora agreed.

“Well, part of that is just plain ‘ol jealousy. I mean, you’re the first non-local woman Hancock’s been seen with, and the fact that you’re also takin’ up with that synth detective as well has turned some heads too.”

“But jealousy can’t be all it is.” Nora interjected.

Daisy looked uneasy. “Look, John’ll be irritated if I tell ya. He doesn’t want to worry ya too much.”

“I can handle his irritation.” Nora replied, now irritable herself. Had Hancock learned nothing by watching Nick and Nora argue about this very same issue of concealing information when they were outside the Solcom’s Joe? She was tired of being left in the dark about things that directly pertained to her safety.

Daisy sighed, “Alright. Some of the town’s been talkin’ about either driving you outta town or overthrowing John from his position as Mayor.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, girlie. You didn't exactly make a good name for yourself while you were working with the Institute.” Daisy rose up a hand to placate Nora's rising indignation, "And I know you were forced to do these things under duress, but the town doesn't know that. You being connected to the Institute and being a former Courser has stirred the town up a bit. There's a lotta people here afraid that you’re an informant sent to help the Institute infiltrate Goodneighbor. The fact that Hancock’s taken you in, patched you up, and is shielding you from the Institute is making some think that he’s gone soft on his anti-Institute stance.”

Nora remembered the rousing speech he gave the town when he proclaimed that the Institute was the real Commonwealth enemy. That moment seemed like it had happened years ago.

“Why does the town think he’s had a change of heart?” Nora asked.

Daisy looked uneasy, “Change of heart is an interesting turn of phrase. They actually think he’s changed more than his heart. They think he’s been replaced by a synth, and they think you’ve somehow responsible.”
“What!? That’s insane.” Nora exclaimed.

“It’s really not that insane when you think about it.” Daisy replied. “You’re dealing with a population of washed up, chemed out social climbers. If they ain’t already paranoid or their brain’s ain’t already addled by the chems, then they’re lookin’ for any excuse to better their social situation.”

“So then what’s the plan?” Nora asked. “I can’t put Hancock in danger by being here. We’ll just cancel our date and I’ll head someplace else, maybe it’s time to head back up to Sanctuary Hills.”

“That sounds like a good plan.” Daisy agreed. “That’s why John sent you to me. I’m gonna outfit ya for your travels. But the date is still going to go as planned. At least humor him, cuz he ain’t the date type of guy. But, I ain’t seen him this happy in a long time. Besides, I think you could use some happiness of your own too.”

Nora sighed in resignation, “Okay, I’ll humor him.”

“Good! Now let’s get ya some clothes first. It’s yer first date, so nothin’ too scandalous, but somethin’ sexy enough to make that ghoul’s blood run hotter than KL-E-O’s lasers.”

Nora allowed herself to be guided into one of the two bedrooms in the small house. On the wall was a lone picture of a bright-eyed young woman standing outside the marble steps of the Boston Public Library. She was beaming amid a sea of other faces and her brown hair was pulled back into a loose bun.

“Woah there.” A gruff voice called out to Liam. “Stop by order of the Wall.”

Liam slowed to a walk but didn’t stop. Did that guy just say ‘by the order of the wall’? How does a wall give orders? He thought.

“Stop!” The man snarled and swung a bat back like he was about to hit Liam. “Stop or my bat’ll taste your blood.”

Liam stopped. Sure enough, the man’s bat was covered in razor wire. The varnish and paint on the business end of the bat was chipped and worn. Some parts of it were even tinged a dark rusty brown. The man was also wearing a strange assortment of armor. Thick padding covered his chest, but it didn’t look sturdy enough to deflect any type of ballistic weapon, and the man wore an athletic helmet with a thick cage that covered his face.

“Why are you in such a hurry there, boy?” The man asked. His tone was gruff but not sinister. Liam surmised that this man was probably just a common wastelander and not a chem-addicted raider. Nevertheless, the wastelander’s face was dirty and Liam could detect the faint but still pungent smell of body odor.

“I’m not here to cause trouble.” Liam replied quickly and rose his hands to show that he was unarmed. “I’m looking for someone who can help me. I’m from the Institute, or at least I was, and --”

A sharp, blunt pain exploded across the back of his head and Liam dropped to his knees. Immediately several hands grabbed him and pinned him painfully to the ground.

The man who Liam was talking to put his bat right next to his face and knelt down. The razor wire kissed his skin, and he pressed down hard enough to draw blood. “Are you a fuckin’ synth?”
“Me?” Liam choked out while trying not to move. “No. I was born in the Institute. I’m human. I mean you -- argh -- I mean you no harm!”

“Whad’ya say boss?” A deep voice said from behind him. “Unless we blow his brains out right now, there ain’t no way of tellin’ if he’s lyin’”

“Should we bring him to the Mayor?” A third voice asked. This voice belonged to a woman.

“No.” their leader said and pulled the bat away from Liam’s face. “We’ll take him to Valentine. If anyone’d be able to tell if this kid is telling the truth, he certainly can. Besides, we can’t trust the Mayor to give his full attention to this matter.”

Someone grabbed Liam by his collar and pulled him to his feet and the man with the bat roughly grabbed Liam’s chin. “You’re gonna follow us nice and quiet. You’re not gonna make trouble cuz if you do, you won't ever be walkin’ again. D’you understand?”

Liam nodded vigorously. The man who hit Liam holstered a police baton, roughly grabbed his shirt, and pulled him along a large brick wall. The group of four led Liam around the corner and past a rusted bronze statue of a man swinging a bat at an unseen assailant. They led him inside and through an abandoned ticketing area. A bored looking, red-haired man sat behind the counter smoking a cigarette.

“Who’s the new guy?” He asked the group.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it Danny and just go get us the Detective.” Liam’s lead captor barked. Danny sighed, obviously displeased at being ordered around, and clambered up a back set of stairs.

Liam was pushed down a concrete ramp that met a set of metal stairs, but as soon as he stepped out into the grey sunlight, his eyes widened in awe.

A large community sprawled out before him and people bustled around going to and from their daily tasks. A man dressed in a Pre War letterman’s jacket was barking out deals on hair tonic while the woman across the way was chopping up bloody pieces of meat and wrapping them up in parchment paper. A balding black man dressed in robes was greeting people with a luminous smile as they passed by. He even greeted Liam with a friendly and warm handshake.

“Greetings newcomer!” He said. “I hope you haven’t found yourself in some trouble with our illustrious Diamond City guards.”

“Er--”

“No no, dear boy, you don’t have to answer me. The only person you have to answer to is Him.”

The man replied and patted him on the shoulder. “If you find your worldly trouble resolved, consider visiting me if your spiritual burdens are weighing too heavily on your soul.”

Liam saw the lead guard roll his eyes and guide him off to the left. “Let’s go. We ain’t got all day. If Valentine clears you, then you can ogle the city as much as you want.”

The last thing Liam saw before he was led to a darkened doorway was large white graffiti with letters painted almost five feet high that read: THE WALL IS PROTECTION. THE WALL IS LIFE. THE WALL IS SAFETY. He noted how the word ‘wall’ was capitalized as a proper noun.

The guards led Liam into a gutted and empty locker room. The mirrors and sinks had long been removed, but the lockers still held an assortment of athletic gear. He noticed that nearly every wooden bench had baseball bats and small, white leather balls embroidered with red lacing laying
Towards the end of the locker room, Liam saw a set of metal cages and balked against his captors. The man holding onto his shirt didn’t let go and roughly pushed him towards one of the cells.

“What are you doing?” He exclaimed “I haven’t done anything!”

“Kid, you can get in the cell or you can have my friend Ray put you in there.” The leader growled. The guard named Ray grinned and snapped his baton open.

Liam ducked his head and hustled into the jail cell before he could feel the sharp, painful blow of the baton again. The two men cackled like old crones and slammed the metal door shut behind him.

“You just sit tight in there. If Valentine clears you, then you’ll be set free and you’ll get our sincerest apologies.” The leader said. Sarcasm edged his voice while he grinned; his tone told Liam that he didn’t think that would ever happen.

“Why do I have to wait for this Detective Valentine?” Liam asked. “Can’t you question me yourself?”

The female guard rolled her eyes. Her straw blond hair was cropped short, nearly buzzed close to her scalp, in a style that reminded him of a courser’s haircut. “You can stop playing dumb, synth. If you didn’t come here to infiltrate someone then you came here to spy on us. Well neither of those things are gonna fucking happen.”

“C’mon Kari, let’s get back to our rounds. The boss will stay with this synth and make sure he don’t escape.” Ray said.

Kari snorted indignantly but left. On her way out, Liam heard her murmur something shockingly polite to an unseen person in the hallway.

“Afternoon Detective.” She said.

He didn’t hear what this detective said in response, but when he finally stepped out of the shadows Liam’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates.

“Detective, we have a kid here sayin’ that he’s from the Institute.” the lead guard said.

Liam didn’t know what to expect when he first saw Detective Valentine. Hell, he wasn’t even sure what a detective actually did, but seeing a rough-looking and tattered Gen-2 synth with a cigarette clenched between his teeth and dressed in a trench coat and a tan fedora was definitely not what he was expecting.

The synth looked at Liam with blazing yellow eyes. He was sizing him up. The synth exhaled smoke and it wafted up through the gap in his neck in addition to exhaling out his nose.

“What’s yer name, kid?” The synth asked. His voice was different. It wasn’t the robotic, neutral voice that all Gen-2s had. His voice crackled slightly, but it held a smoky tone that was patient but firm.

He cleared his throat, “Liam.” He coughed again. “My name is Liam Binet. My father is a scientist at the Institute.”

The detective’s face didn’t change; it was as though his answer had no bearing whatsoever on his
follow-up question.

“And how did ya get here Liam?” The Detective asked and took a few steps closer. The synth wasn’t any taller than the other male Gen-2s, and despite the scars and gouges, his face looked similar to the other Gen-2s at the Institute; still there was something unique about this one aside for the odd clothing choice.

“I was teleported here. Well not here, but outside the CIT ruins.” He replied quickly.

The synth detective eyed up his uniform. “So you’re from Robotics?”

“Yes.” Liam replied He almost felt compelled to say ‘sir’ along with it but held his tongue. For some reason, he felt it would come across as disingenuous. “My dad runs the division.”

That got the detective to smirk.

“So why did an Institute kid whose Dad runs the Robotics division get teleported to the CIT ruins, and why does that kid hit up Diamond City first?” He asked and flicked his spent cigarette into the dirt nearby and crushed it with his heel.

Liam flushed but didn’t remove his eyes from the synth’s intense stare. “I was banished from the Institute. They teleported me here by force. I have nowhere else to go and I saw the lights from Diamond City first and thought that would be a safe spot to rest and plan my next move.”

“Ya hear that, Detective?” The guard snarled. “He means to replace us. He’s gonna slit our throats in the night and replace us with a dead-eyed, wire-for-brains, synth replacement.”

Nick shot the man a cold look and the guard seemed to wither beneath his gaze, “Uh, no offense meant.”

He turned his attention back to the boy in the cage, “So why were you banished, kid?”

“I helped some synths and a woman escape.” Liam replied.

The detective’s eyes narrowed when Liam said ‘woman’ but continued his line of questioning.

“Why? Why put yourself at risk for synths? The Institute doesn’t consider synths as people. They’re nothing more than an advanced screwdriver, right? So why go outta your way to save a glorified toaster?”

“I -- uh.” The question was complex and it was a question that Liam had wrestled with himself. He had to choose his words carefully. “I thought it was the right thing to do.”

“You’re quite the altruist, aren’t you?” Nick replied sardonically.

Liam sighed, “Alright, it started as a challenge. I wanted to see if I could do it. Smuggling out a population out from beneath the Director’s nose was going to be the highlight of my year, but then it turned into something more.”

“Ah, so you’re a thrill seeker who turned into altruist.” Nick replied and then changed his line of questioning. “Were you ever caught before this?”

“There were a few close calls, but most of the scientists have been working on other projects for the Director, so I’ve been pretty lucky until now. I think Eve suspected something, but she never said anything.”
“Who’s Eve?”

“She’s our personal synth. My father created her after my mother died.” But upon seeing Nick’s disgusted face, Liam quickly added, “But she’s mostly there to help us tidy up around the living quarters. She thinks of me as her son, but my father never meant for her to replace my mother. Eve has the most personal freedom than any other synth in the Institute. In fact, her ideas about synth independences and personhood inspired me to help the synths.”

“So your father never …” Nick’s voice trailed off uncomfortably.

“No! Oh God no!” Liam exclaimed. As much as he hated to think about his own father’s sexual habits, he was pretty sure that Eve and his father had never moved past their affectionate but chaste relationship.

The Detective seemed satisfied with that answer and paced slowly on the outside of the cell. His head was bowed and Liam couldn’t see anything other than his thin chin from beneath the fedora. The lead guard watched the detective carefully but was afraid to say anything.

“So, you said there was a woman with you.” He said after a long moment. “You clarified that she was in fact a woman and not a synth. So I’m assuming she is human. Who is she?”

Liam frowned. He knew the detective was talking about Nora, but he also knew that giving away too much information about her to the wrong people could put Nora into unnecessary danger.

“I don’t know her name.” Liam lied. He could feel the lie burn behind his eyes and he fixed his gaze on the spent cigarette in the dirt. “She came across us when we were trying to escape. I took her with us so she wouldn’t compromise our situation. I never got her name, in fact, I never got any of their names. It was cleaner like that.”

The detective’s luminous yellow eyes scrutinized Liam. He didn’t believe the lie, hell any detective worth his salt wouldn’t, but he was trying to determine the kid’s motive.

Then the synth sighed, “Hank, let him go.”

Hank, the baseball bat-wielding guard, perked up. “So whadyua think? Is he a synth? Is he gonna come and replace us all?”

It took all of Nick’s self control to not roll his eyes at the guard. The kid may have been fooled by Hank’s gnarly-looking bat and his rough demeanor, but the guard’s intimidation meant nothing when he all but trembled at the mention of the Institute.

“No Hank, he’s not a synth.” Nick replied dryly. “Let him go.”

Liam heard the electric buzz of a button and the metal cell door swung open on its own. He didn’t need to be asked twice and smoothed down his crumpled and dirty uniform to retain some shred of dignity.

“Gentlemen, it’s been an educating experience.” Liam replied politely. “Now if you don’t mind, I would appreciate directions to a place with a bed and —“

“— Nah, kid. You’re coming with me back to my agency. Just because I’ve cleared you, doesn’t mean we’re done here.”

Liam’s heart sank as Nick gently, but firmly, put his good hand on the boy’s back and guided him out of the dugout.
Great, more questioning, he thought.

He didn’t know how much time had passed since he arrived in the wasteland. Truthfully, it couldn’t have been more than a few hours, but to Liam it felt like an eternity. He desperately wanted to find a bed, find some food, and collect his thoughts.

Once they were out of earshot from Hank the guard, Nick spoke, “Look, this place is dangerous right now, especially for people like you. I have a few more questions to ask you without that halfwit guard prying, and after I’m done, I suggest you get some supplies and head out of town.”

The walk to the agency was short, and Liam was ushered quickly into the darkened room. The Detective flicked the lights on and the small hum of the generator could be heard in the background.

“Take a seat.” Nick pointed to an overstuffed yellow armchair.

Liam did as he was told and watched the synth Detective closely. All of this — the unique personality, the independent thought, and even the smoking — was highly irregular for a Gen-2 synth, and from the looks of the place, it looked like the synth lived here.

The Detective sat down on the other side of the desk and pulled a thin folder from the nearby filing cabinet. The manila yellow folder was faded and the handwritten notes were condensed the the front and back of one page.

“So, kid. You’re gonna tell me everything that’s happened to Nora since she arrived in the Institute. You’ll also tell me about each department, their figureheads, and the Institute’s leader. Once I’m satisfied with the information and once I’m certain that you’re information is truthful, then you’re free to leave.”

“I don’t know of any person named Nora.” Liam met the Detective’s luminous eyes and willed himself to not look away.

“Kid, this is going to be easier if we start off with the truth from the get-go.” Nick sighed.

Liam shifted uneasily, “Look, I can’t provide you with that information; it’s considered treason. I’d never be allowed to return to the Institute if they found out.”

Nick snorted at Liam’s unwavering loyalty. “You committed treason when you helped Nora and the others escape. All of that is water under the bridge. There’s a fight simmering beneath the surface here and I need all the information I can get to help us win.”

Liam frowned. The synth seemed trustworthy enough. He had managed to circumvent the Institute’s default Gen-2 subroutines to develop independent thought, so Liam felt safe that what he said wouldn’t make it back to Father.

“Alright,” He admitted. “I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Nora felt foolish walking out of Daisy’s bedroom once the ghoul had scrounged together a couple outfits for Nora to wear. Except, “outfit” didn’t quite fit the getup that Daisy had procured.

“Promise you won't laugh.” She called out into the sitting room. She could smell Hancock’s cigarettes and desperately wanted one of her own.

“I won't laugh, sunshine. I promise.” His gravel voice came in response.
She took a couple deep breaths and soothed down the freshly ironed dress before stepping out into the room.

When she entered, the room was so silent that Nora could’ve heard a pin drop. Hancock was looking at her with a deer-in-the-headlights expression, and Daisy’s face was unreadable.

Nora’s dress was a mint green color with thick straps and a modest neckline. A cream colored, satin bow sat languidly at her side, and tiny pink flowers were embroidered in the skirt. Nora wanted to point out to Daisy that the dress was more appropriate for a spring picnic or going to Easter church service, but she held her tongue.

Although Daisy didn’t wear makeup, she still had some cosmetics that had held up despite their 200 year shelf life. A faint pink color stained Nora’s lips and mascara darkened her eyelashes. Despite the wig, Nora thought she looked nice, if not a little awkward in her own skin.

“So what do ya think?” Nora asked. She realized that she was actually afraid of what Hancock’s response would be.

Hancock rose from his seat and gently cupped Nora’s face in his hands. “I think yer beautiful, sunshine.”

He kissed her gently and Nora sighed in relief and in pleasure at his touch. Daisy cleared her throat but grinned when they had broken away from each other like two students who were interrupted during a hallway makeup session.

“I got one more thing before you two head out into the wastes.” Daisy replied. She opened up a large steamer trunk that was stashed in the corner next to a broken down television set and pulled out a long silver dagger and a modified .44 caliber pistol.

From handle to tip, the knife was nearly as long as Nora’s forearm and it was pristine despite its obvious age, and the gun came with its own bandolier and holster. Nora knew the gettup would look silly paired with her nice clothing, but she couldn’t help but wonder what they’d look like when she was wearing road leathers and her traveling clothes.

“Why are you giving me a knife and a gun?” Nora asked.

Daisy smirked, “Because you can’t always play fair out there, girlie. John says you can handle yourself pretty well in a firefight, but what happens when the ammo runs out and they still want your blood?”

The knife felt awkward in her hand, so she carefully slid it back into its leather sheath. “Thank you, Daisy. Thanks for everything.”

"Don't thank me quite yet." She chuckled and held out a large grey overcoat to Hancock. The ghoul looked at it as though she handed him a pile of brahmin manure.

"What am I suppose to do with this?" He rasped.

"You're suppose to wear it, you dolt." She replied. I'll keep your jacket safe for you, but you know damn well that you can't walk out into the wasteland dressed like you normally do. People will spot you right away.

Hancock looked physically pained at the thought of leaving his trademark red colonial jacket behind. "Can I at least keep the belt?"
Daisy sighed. "I suppose, but just keep it hidden. You are the most conspicuous person in the wasteland, and I don't want my hard work ruined by your vanity."

Hancock pulled the jacket on and grimaced as though the woolen material was made of razor wire.

Then Daisy handed him a burlap bag containing Nora’s traveling clothes, some food, medicine, and other assortments to Hancock. “If you head out my back door and cross behind KL-E-O’s shop, you should be able to make it outta Goodneighbor unseen.”

“Thanks Daisy.” Hancock rasped and gently took Nora’s hand. He still wouldn’t meet Nora’s questioning gaze.

“You watch out for her, John.” Daisy said. “This one’s a rare breed. You be good to her.”

Hancock raised up a hand in farewell and guided Nora down the hallway and out the far door in the kitchen. The air was moderately chilly, but the sun’s rays were warm enough to keep the threatening frost at bay. Nora pulled a grey wool overcoat around herself.
Hancock led Nora down a deserted alleyway. He ducked behind a broken fire escape and pulled out his knife and began prying off bolts and nails from a segment of the wall. As he did that, Nora could hear the chatter from the Marketplace and felt uneasy. Although the thick blanket of clouds in slate grey sky hid the sun, Nora knew that it couldn’t be later than mid afternoon. Goodneighbor’s citizens were just hitting their stride; if the sounds from the town square were any indication, the traveling traders had made their way into the city and were eagerly and loudly bartering for attention and caps.

Nora didn’t know why she felt so uneasy. Maybe it was the way people stared at her when she walked the short distance from the Old State House to the Memory Den. Or maybe it was the complete and utter hatred that she saw on their faces when Hancock nearly dragged her into Daisy’s. Goodneighbor was always a rough sort of town, but Nora found a cavalier charm about the place. But at some point, the town had changed. The change is what put Nora on edge.

“This way, sunshine.” Hancock whispered and gently guided her towards a hole in the metal and wood wall. A piece of the patchwork wall was stashed off to the side. In its place was a gap that was nearly three foot wide and over four feet high; it was plenty large enough for them both to fit through if they went one at a time.

Nora lifted up the her dress to her knees and gingerly stepped out of the hole, minding any protruding nails or bits of metal. Hancock followed after her and then gently lowered the bit of metal and wood back into place.

“Should I be concerned that the Mayor has to sneak out of his own city?” Nora asked. She glanced suspiciously at the ghoul and crossed her arms. Hancock had received that look from other women; it usually meant that he was about to get an earful from a disgruntled woman over some matter or the other.

He sighed. He was hoping to get a little farther into their journey before he had to start dealing with the can of worms that Daisy had unleashed.

“I sneak out, and into, Goodneighbor all the time, sunshine.” He replied with a grin, but he could see that Nora wasn’t going to be charmed by his cavalier attitude.

“I’m sure you do.” She agreed judicially, “And I know that there are some things you couldn’t say when you were surrounded by your citizens, but now that we’re outside the city walls, I want to hear the truth Hancock. Daisy’s told me enough to understand why you’d keep this from me, but I want to hear all of it.”

He exhaled in a long huff. This was going to take awhile and standing out in the alleyway for anyone to pick off wasn’t the most opportune location for a discussion of this caliber, but he knew that Nora wouldn’t give up. He looked left and right to check if the coast was clear. They were partially hidden beneath an overpass, but he led her away from the wall and towards a chainlink fence that was partially tipped over. A large piece of broken concrete blocked them from the alleyway. Satisfied with their vantage point, he turned to her, and she saw the haunting look in his onyx eyes.

“Look, shit hit the fan the day you disappeared. The entire city heard that the Railroad HQ had
fallen; even if they didn’t know where the HQ was, the citizens figured that if an organization like that could fall to the Institute then nobody was safe.” His voice was low and even, but his hands trembled out of anger at the memory and out of a want for Jet that was currently stowed away in their bags.

“Then Nicky bursts into town nearly on death’s door and starts mumblin’ about how crows are followin’ him. I didn’t believe him at first, but then I started putting things together, for instance, how the crows were all pristine and normal-lookin’ despite the radiation mutating most of the other animals. So then I killed one in the street and sure enough, the fuckin’ thing was wires and oil.”

Nora nodded in agreement. She knew the next part of the story already. When Hancock and the other Goodneighbor citizens began killing all of the crows on sight, she remembered how Ayo punched a computer terminal in utter rage. He then went on a tirade against Nora and claimed that this was proof that she couldn’t be trusted.

Hancock continued, “Well after we were certain that those damned birds were extinct in almost all of Boston, I began hearing whispers and rumors that people thought that I was somehow a synth who was trying to gain the people’s trust so I could hand them over to the Institute.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why would they think you’re a synth?” Nora scoffed.

He shifted uneasily. “It’s pretty common knowledge with people that folks change after they reappear when they were missing for a bit. But it’s small changes, ya feel me? One person loves to drink whisky, but now they come back and won't touch a drop of the stuff. Another person hates cats, but then comes back lovin’ them. A devoted husband leaves and comes back angry as hell beatin’ on the wife and kids.”

Nora wasn’t following what he was saying. “Okay, but how have you changed?”

Hancock let out a low huff. He didn’t want to bring up his own past, especially not when the truth might hurt Nora, but he let the truth spill from his lips like a confession. “Look sunshine, you’re the first woman I’ve been with for any considerable length of time, ya feel me?. I know ya’ve heard the rumors about me. Hell, Nicky’s probably dropped a few choice warnings here and there about me, and he ain’t outta line there. I ain’t usually the monogamous type, Nora. Never have been.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything. His confession arose all sorts of questions that she didn’t have the heart or the time to get into now. But Hancock saw the doubt on her face and took her hand into his. His skin felt comfortably warm. She wanted to bask in his warmth.

“Sunshine, I know that wasn’t the news you wanted to hear about me but it’s the truth. I hate to admit it, but before you I ain’t been without a … ” He flounder for the right term.

“A fuck buddy?” Nora replied with a knowing grin.

He sighed in relief at Nora’s assistance, “Yeah. That. I ain’t been without a woman for maybe a
week at the longest. But the rumors started swirling anyway. I like sex, Nora. Always have, even
before I turned ghoul, but going cold turkey while I waited for ya, while we searched for ya, well
that’s a pretty distinct change in someone’s personality, doncha think?"

Nora nodded fully understanding the situation. “I’m sorry this happened.”

He rasped, “I’m not! Shit, Nora. If it weren’t for the death threat that I got once you came back to
us, I would’ve done it sooner.”

Nora’s eyes widened, “Someone gave you a death threat!”

Hancock’s face grew serious. “Someone tried. Until I ran them through with the dagger they left
stuck in my office door. I thought a show of brutality would scare the doubters into submission.
But it’s a tactic that I hate, ya feel me. Like I said when we first met, throwin’ my weight around
ain’t my style. Still, once I gutted him on the street like I did to Finn when you and Nicky first got
to my town, I thought I’d have the town’s favor again. But this time, they were more disgusted
than anything else.”

Nora couldn’t help but scoff at Hancock’s strange naiveté. Did he really think people would respect
him if he went around murdering everyone who crossed him?

“Who did you kill?” She asked.

Hancock shifted uneasily. Guilt was written clearly across his face. “The traveling doc who came
to provide free checkups to the locals twice a year. Doc Smithers … or Weathers. Fuck, I can’t
even remember.”

“How did you know that he left you the death threat?” Nora asked. “It could’ve been anyone.”

Hancock shook his head. “It couldn’t be a local. Half the locals can’t write to save their life, let
alone compose a note that said: Fall in line, or your whore’s blood will paint the Institute’s walls.
Besides, he — “ He looked away from Nora. Disgust, unease, and anger etched across his face, but
he continued in an unsteady, raspy whisper. “ — he left me a holotape.”

Hancock pulled out a small orange cassette from his pocket and handed it to Nora. She accepted
the tape and pulled her PipBoy out from their rucksack. She loaded the tape into the back of the
device and pressed PLAY.

The device let out a loud screech of feedback and then she heard a sneer hidden in a man’s
measured and venomous voice.

This is a message for the abomination that calls himself Mayor, and the washed up, defect synth in
the detective’s costume.

Nora blinked as tears spilled from her eyes. She’d remember that voice until the day that she died.
The voice belonged to Justin Ayo.

You will drop your idiotic games with the terrorist group otherwise known as The Railroad. You
will allow any and all traders into your city, and you will stop interfering in the Institute’s plans
above ground. My informant, Doctor Weathers, will be allowed to setup a medical practice in your
town. In exchange for cheap and necessary medical care, he will send bi-weekly reports of the
activities in Goodneighbor. This is a boon for you, Mayor. Having the Institute as your ally will be
most advantageous in the events to come.

Nora looked expectantly at Hancock. Of all the terrible things that the Institute could’ve done, she
didn’t really see how a demand like this would warrant such a violent action on Hancock’s part.

Then Ayo continued

*If you refuse this deal, then I will hurt the one thing you love most in this world. Nora will die screaming my name. I will disassemble her bit by bit until there’s nothing left of her except her empty whore body, and I will mail you the pieces so you have something to remember her by. She will die knowing that neither of you could’ve saved her. Her blood will be on your hands. Make your choice.*

The audio recording cut out and she ejected the tape and handed it wordlessly back to Hancock. She didn’t realize she was trembling until he pulled her in close to him.

He cleared his throat, “I didn’t hide any of this to hurt ya, sunshine. Shit, even Daisy doesn’t know about the holotape. When ya came back to me. When ya tried to OD on Buffout, I wondered if that cunt had been right. That your blood would be on my hands.”

Nora looked at him and saw that his dark eyes were misting up. “Then when Nicky stripped you down and saw that he nearly made good on his promise, I fuckin’ lost it. I butchered the Doc in the street, and then I got blackout drunk and went fightin’ down at the Combat Zone while Nicky stayed by your bed as you slept. It was a shitty thing to do. I know that and … and I’m sorry.”

He wiped his face with the coarse material of his suit jacket and regained his composure. “I didn’t tell you any of this because you were already dealin’ with way too much. My fuckups and impulsiveness shouldn’t be your problem, and my plan was to get you back to Sanctuary without knowin’ how bad it had gotten.”

Nora looked at the ghoul — really looked at him — and saw that his bravado and charming roguish persona was really an act. Before her was a man completely desperate; he was driven to the brink and he acted in a way that many people would when faced with an impossible situation.

“You can’t blame yourself.” She replied gently. “It was my choice to take that second dose. I … it had nothing to do with you.”

He chuckled but it was weak and hollow. “I know that, sunshine. But if there is one thing I wish I could take back, it’s him ever layin’ a hand on you. I wish I could show you just how much you fuckin’ matter to me.”

Nora stepped towards the ghoul and wrapped her arms around his slim waist. He looked nervous for a brief moment and then breathed out a secret that he’d been keeping for a while.

“Nora, I think I’ve loved you ever since we came back from The Glowing Sea.” He whispered into her hair.

Her breath hitched in her chest. In part because she knew that the attraction between them both was powerful and magnetic, but she chalked some of it up to Hancock’s charisma and flirtatious charm. Still, hearing that Hancock’s feelings for her ran much deeper than just a physical connection ran through her body like an electric shock.

“I — Uh.” She sputtered lamely.

He chuckled and pulled her tighter to him as though he was afraid she’d float away if he let go.

“You don’t gotta say anything, sunshine. This ain’t the best time for a discussion like this, so don’t feel obligated to say somethin’ you don’t mean. That still don’t change anythin’ for me. I love you. I’ve loved you for a while. But I ain’t naive to think that you’d feel the same for me.”
“Hancock…” No, Nora thought. This man had poured his heart and soul out to her and it seemed wrong to address him by his surname. “John. I feel a lot of things for you. After everything I’ve been through, I am trying to work out my own feelings about everything. That doesn’t mean I don’t love you, it just means that I’m …”

“…that you’re thinking things through.” Hancock finished for her.

“Yeah.” She replied lamely.

Hancock placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “You and Nicky are one in the same. Always the analytical types, and I wouldn’t change you for all the Jet in the world.”

“Thank you.” Nora replied. “And thanks for telling me about everything. As hard as it is, I appreciate not being kept in the dark.”

Hancock nodded and then broke apart from her and bent down to pick up their rucksack full of their traveling clothes, supplies, food, and bedding. “C’mon, let’s head out. We got a full evening ahead of us.”

“So this is a proper date then?” Nora clarified.

“Oh of course!” He replied with a smirk. “I mean, it ain’t a candlelight dinner, and it may require some elbow grease and some pest control, but I think you’ll like it.”

“Does it at least involve alcohol?” Nora asked with a grin. Doctor Amari had suggested that Nora abstain from alcohol consumption since alcohol and depression tend to react poorly to one another, but Nora desperately wanted something stronger than the purified water and Nuka Cola that she had been given by the good Doc every time she checked on Nora’s injuries.

“There’s gonna be more than enough beer to go around, and I may be able to scrounge us up some of the harder stuff.” He replied with a wink. “Of course, what kinda date would this be if I wasn’t a bad influence on ya, sunshine?”

Hancock held out his arm which Nora gladly took. Amidst all of the bloodshed, political coups, and fighting, Nora finally felt somewhat normal — at least as normal as one could feel when dressed in a disguise just so she could go on a date.

“Lead the way then.” She ordered to Hancock with a warm smile. He grinned back and they both stepped around the broken chainlink fence and made their way East towards the Charles River.

Nick poured over his notes and ran his synthetic hand along his warm forehead. If he were a flesh and blood man, he would’ve thought that he was running a fever. His internal scans told him that his coolant was running a little hot, but he knew that it had nothing to do with an illness and had everything to do with the information that Liam provided about the Institute and about the horrors that Nora witnessed.

His untidy chicken scratch writing filled an entire legal pad. Blotches of ink peppered the yellow paper where he pressed too hard with the pen. After nearly three hours of talking, the words on the paper seemed to blur together.

Liam told him everything he could about the Institute including their goals of synth production and eventual synth takeover, and their failed FEV lab courtesy of Dr. Virgil’s desertion.

The biggest reveal, however, came only twenty minutes into their discussion. Liam gave Nick the
final piece to his missing person’s case. The Case of the Kidnapped Child from Vault 111 had been
solved, and Nick couldn’t be any more disappointed in its resolution. Deep down, Nick knew he
had figured the truth out when the Courser kidnapped Nora at Greentech, but he didn’t want to
admit it to himself. Even after he saw her again at Libertalia where she had issued the warning,
Father doesn’t give second chances, Nick didn’t want to be right. Denial was a helluva thing,
especially when it came out of trying to protect the woman he loved from more senseless pain.

Nick thought back to the discussion that he had with Hancock earlier that month. Hancock thought
that Father was a title, like General or Mayor. But Father wasn’t just a title like Hancock thought,
and Mother wasn’t just a chance moniker that Nora had somehow been given. These were names
that held reverence and importance. If this man called Father, was the creator of the Gen-3 synths,
then Nora’s nickname couldn’t be random. No, she was Mother to them all, including the Director
whose birth name must’ve been Shaun. Nick would’ve staked his life on that. Nonetheless, all of
this information added a whole new layer to Nora’s recent depressive episode, and Nick felt
helpless that he didn’t have a solution ready that would ease Nora’s pain.

Just then, the door to his office bursted opened which snapped him out of his thoughts. Piper
stormed in wide-eyed; the brim of her press hat was askew. She looked like she had been running
all night.

“Nicky!” She panted, “I have some breaking news that you need to hear.”

“What happened, Piper?” After Nora disappeared, Piper took it upon herself to act as the de facto
press secretary for Operation: Rescue Blue. While Nick was hesitant at first to involve her in
something as messy and dangerous as this, by the time she worked out what happened to Nora, she
damn near insisted on being involved.

The woman’s chest heaved. “Hoh boy. Just gimme a minute. I -- I ran all the -- way from Mercer
Safehouse.” She panted and then looked to her right. There she saw Liam staring back at her wide-
eyed and dumbfounded. He had set up a small workstation in the corner of Nick’s office, and was
in the middle of sketching out parts of the Institute from memory. Two empty noodle bowls created
condensation rings around discarded drawings, and a third half full bowl sat on a rickety coffee
table with its contents still steaming. Despite all of that, Liam looked upon Piper with a strange
combination of awe and affection. This woman was cool. She was strong. Hell, she had a great pair
of … brown eyes that accentuated her lovely oval face. If Piper noticed Liam’s open-mouthed
ogling, she had the good sense to not say anything about it.

“Who’s the kid?” She asked.

Liam cleared his throat and jumped up to his feet so quickly that it looked like the chair had
shocked him. He held out his hand, “I’m Liam. Liam Binet. I’m from the Institute.”

Piper looked at his hand like it was poisonous and then looked at Nick. “The Institute? Nicky, is he
serious?”

Nick sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. “Kid, you gotta stop tellin’ people
that you’re from The Institute. People don’t handle news like that very well around here. Just say
that you’re a genius kid from a small settlement on the coast of Salem. Ya know? Like we
rehearsed?”

He nodded and then turned to Piper and held out his hand in earnest. “Sorry about that. Can we
start again? I’m Liam. I’m helping the detective with intel on …” He faltered and looked
helplessly at the synth. “I’m helping the detective with some of his work.” He finished vaguely.
“Hoh boy, Nicky.” Piper smirked and shot the kid a friendly wink. “You got your work cut out with this one.” Still, she took his broad hand and shook it. “Nice to meet you. The name’s Piper. I’m Diamond City’s resident reporter, fact finder, truth teller --”

“-- and busy body.” Nick finished for her. It seems his dour mood wouldn’t end. “So what’s your ‘breaking news’, Piper?”

She stuck out her tongue at Nick and then pulled out a beaten, small spiral notebook from her pocket. She flipped through the first few pages and then stopped on one that was full of notes, diagrams, and quotes.

“Okay listen to this.” She began. “According to a Railroad operative, there’s been a rise in Super Mutant sightings and there’s been a rise in abductions across the lower Boston area. The Railroad thinks these two events are connected, especially since Nora learned from that scientist out in The Glowing Sea what they actually do to their kidnapped victims.”

Nick frowned. “Liam, can you verify that the Institute uses their kidnapping victims as subjects for their FEV experiments?”

Liam bit his lip nervously. The Institute’s FEV program was their most classified work. He wanted to help Nick and Piper, but he couldn’t help but feel guilty that he was betraying his family’s and his friend’s. He ran his fingers through his hair nervously. Nick and Piper looked at him expectantly and he sighed in defeat and resignation. “Look, most of the information that I have is based on rumors. My dad worked with the physical production of the synth’s body; the mind and programming was always done by Ayo’s team and the SRB, and thanks to Nora, Ayo’s taken his secrets to his grave.”

Liam winced at how he sounded. Even Piper seemed to frown at him. “I — I didn’t mean that it was Nora’s fault, I just —“

“We get it, kid.” Nick replied. “Just tell us what you know.”

“Just that before the FEV labs were shut down, some of us children would tell each other scary stories as a joke. The stories pretty much boiled down to one undeniable fact: behave or Father will throw you in the vats.”

“The vats?” Piper asked.

“Yeah, you know. The FEV vats. That’s how the Institute created Super Mutants. They’d dip a victim’s body into the vat, or they’d inject the FEV straight into their bloodstream. The Institute probably did this to --” Liam did a quick mental calculation before continuing, “two hundred and forty people in the span of ten years, give or take.”

“But Super Mutants have been around for longer than that.” Piper frowned.

“They have,” Nick agreed, “but despite their biological limitations and how often they’re targeted by raiders and other things in the wasteland, they haven’t dropped in population. Granted, I’m not an expert on their nature, but I do know they’re impotent. They can’t repopulate. Still, the Institute could’ve easily replenished the Commonwealth stock that fall from raiders, hunter’s, disease, or starvation with fresh new victims straight from the Institute kidnappings.”

Liam nodded in agreement. “It was common knowledge in the Institute that ‘going topside’ was seen as a punishment. Everyone in the Institute thought this place was crawling with dangers, and it was Father’s eventual goal to have the entire wasteland filled with synths and Super Mutants. That
way, he could control the variable so to speak. Synths are easy to deactivate, and Super Mutants don’t have a long life expectancy. I think Father assumed that in forty or fifty years, the wasteland would be sanitized and ready to repopulate once again.”

Nick replied, “What you’re speaking of is genocide.”

Liam nodded. “Father doesn’t think of it like that. He calls his plan ‘mankind’s best hope.’”

“And there’s another thing, Nick.” Piper replied. She looked worried which was an strange look for a woman who had survived several assassination attempts on her life.

“Why do I have a feeling that I’m not gonna like this.” He replied dryly.

“There’s been a couple reports…sightings…of a man looking for Nora.” She began. “There hasn’t been one consistent physical description so far, and he never stays in one place for very long. So far, he’s checked in at Sanctuary Hills, Abernathy, Sunshine Tidings, and Hangman’s Alley.”

Nick frowned, “What does he want? Does anyone know who he is?”

Piper shifted uneasily and ran her fingers through her thick, short hair. “He’s been saying …” But Piper’s voice died on her lips.

“What?” Nick asked. His stomach flip-flopped painfully in his stomach from the stress and the intrigue, “Piper, what is it?”

She bit her lip in hesitation. “He — He says that he’s her husband.”

“What?” Nick sputtered. “How is that even possible?”

Piper shrugged but looked uneasy. “I don’t think it is possible. From the little that Blue’s told me, her husband is six feet in the ground, right?”

Nick nodded. “Yes, she told me that they buried Nate back in Sanctuary Hills.”

“He could be a spy just saying what he thinks Nora wants to hear.” Piper suggested. “I mean, none of us know what her late husband looked like. How do we know that this guy isn’t just lying.”

Liam’s pale, worried face looked almost ethereal in the dim office. “No. He’s not lying.” He said in a grave voice.

Both Piper and Nick turned to him. “What?” They both said in unison.

Liam shook his head. “This was one thing that I didn’t share with you about the Institute. I didn’t think Father would’ve gone through with it.”

“Well spit it out, kid. This is important.” Nick barked.

“Back when Nora was working for the Institute, Father was making her a ‘welcome home’ gift of sorts. It was a personal project that he had commissioned from my father after our success with Eve.” Liam began. His voice was quiet but steady. “Before I was banished from the Institute, my father had finished the project to Father’s exact specifications.

“And what was the project?” Nick asked.

Liam’s blue eyes met his yellow ones. “He wanted to give Nora her husband back so he created a synthetic clone based off of their shared DNA. He was going to present him to Nora the week after
her mission to kill Dr. Virgil. It’s not a well kept secret that Father’s sick with some kind of terminal illness, and since he never had kids of his own he needs someone to take up the position as Director after he dies. He wanted Nora to take over and lead side-by-side with her husband.”

Nick’s jaw clenched and Piper’s brown eyes were wide in astonishment. “Does Nora know about her son’s illness?”

“No.” Liam replied. “Everyone was under strict orders to not divulge that secret to her, including me.”

Nick sighed and quickly jotted all of this information down on the notepad. He wanted to keep this information from Nora, at least for the time being, but he knew that she would be irate with being kept in the dark once again.

“Piper, where was the last place that people saw him?” Nick asked.

Piper consulted her notes, “Hangman’s Alley, two days ago.”

Nick rose abruptly from his seat and pulled on his coat. “We gotta sweep the city. This would be the natural place for him to come first. We also gotta get word out to Hancock, Fahrenheit and The Neighborhood Watch, and The Railroad. If he gets to Nora, he could destroy her.”

Piper nodded and gave Nick and Liam a jaunty salute. “I’m on it. I’ll tell Travis to spread the news on the Diamond City Radio. Even if we don’t find him, at least that synth will know we’re onto his games.”

“C’mon kid, you’re gonna help me find him. You know the Institute better than anyone here, and we can’t let him get to Nora.”

Liam jumped to his feet and pulled on the letterman’s jacket that Nick had purchased from the clothing store in the marketplace. Ever since he arrived topside, Liam hadn’t experienced nearly as much horror and bloodshed that the Institute propagated in their warnings about the wasteland. Piper and Nick were good people, he reasoned. Maybe Father was wrong about the wasteland. Maybe there was something about the world that was worth saving after all.

“‘Well, here we are.” Hancock announced and gestured to a large green, white, and orange sign with a three leaf clover centered above neon letters which read: SHAMROCK TAPHOUSE.

“I’ve heard a lot about this place.” Nora remarked. “It listed as one of the top ten bars in Boston before the bombs fell. Also, this bar supposedly played a role in the American Revolution.”

“And now this bar is home to a group of five raiders who broke off from Tower Tom’s group at the Beantown Brewery.” Hancock replied. “I don’t understand why they’d come here. There ain’t much around here worth raiding.”

“Wait, did you say Beantown Brewery?” Nora asked.

“Sure did, sunshine. Rumors has it that Tower Tom and his guys were taken out earlier this year. You know the place?”

Nora nodded and then shyly smirked. “I know, I was the one who took them out.”

“That’s cute, sister. Real cute.” Hancock chuckled and dropped their bags by the entrance door. He couldn’t see a lookout posted, nor could he hear the faint humming of an idle turret. Catching the
rafters by surprise would be easy. They wouldn’t be ready; it would be like shooting radioactive fish in a barrel.

“I’m not being cute.” Nora replied with slight indignity. “I’m serious! A couple of their men kidnapped Vadim when he wouldn’t pay them for work. Me and another Diamond City local rescued him.”

“What kinda Diamond City do-gooder would go up against five armed raiders?” He asked incredulously as he lined his jacket with some Jet, stimpacks, and Med-X.

“Fine, don’t believe it.” Nora replied stubbornly and loaded her small .44 handgun with bullets. She passed Hancock his combat shotgun. Everything in her mind told her that what they were about to do was reckless. She was in a dress, without armor, and was back to her old non-technologically augmented self. Granted, her combat abilities had vastly improved since working with the Institute, Nora couldn’t help but miss the near superhuman abilities that the cybernetics provided. Still, despite her disadvantages, Nora couldn’t wait to jump into the fray. She was actually anticipating this fight.

Her face was set into a determined scowl. Hancock looked at her out of the corner of his eye and then shook his head in disbelief, “Are you seriously tellin’ me that you and some Diamond City local took on a group of raiders by yourselves?”

Nora blasé shrug came more out of defiance than modesty. “I guess so. I mean, if I was lying I think I’d make up a more impressive story. You know? Maybe throw a Super Mutant or two into the mix and say that I also killed a deathclaw with one shot.”

Hancock held up his hands in surrender. “Alright. Fuck, I’m sorry sunshine. I believe ya. Really I do.”

“No need.” She replied and unholstered her gun. “I’m more of a “believe-it-when-I-see-it” type of gal too. You’ll find that I’m not so incompetent anymore, Mayor. So watch and learn.”

Nora kicked open the door and entered the darkened bar with her gun drawn. Hancock followed closely behind. The popping sound of Nora’s small pistol and the panicked yelling coming from the ambushed raiders meant nothing to him. No, the ghoul didn’t even pull the trigger on his gun; he was much too busy watching how Nora’s ass moved in Daisy’s dress.

This woman was far beyond picking her teeth out of the gutter. No, Nora was fully and completely a wasteland survivor.
Knowing Me, Knowing You

Chapter Notes

There’s not much going on in terms of the overarching plot of the story. If you don’t like explicit smut, then feel free to skip this chapter.

For those of you who have been waiting for this moment, I’m happy to say that the Nora/Hancock smut train has finally arrived! Enjoy you sinners ;)

Heed the tags and the warnings. And thank you to everyone who has left reviews and kudos! I appreciate you all.

Chapter 10 -- Knowing Me, Knowing You

When the dust settled, Nora swept from room to room making sure that the coast was clear. Her sweep didn’t take long since the taphouse was comprised of a large wrap around bar, a back storage room, two small bathrooms (one of which had collapsed in on itself), and a large manager’s office with a desk, a couch, and a double bed crammed into each corner of the room.

The raiders had congregated in the basement where the kegs, barrels, and brewery vats were stored. The fight had been decidedly one-sided, as Nora took three out of the five of them out with well placed shots to the head. The other two scrambled to cover but were too inebriated to be effective; they missed every shot they took at the duo.

They slurred insults at them both. Hancock lobbed his own insults right back, but Nora was deaf to it all. She was waiting in ambush. She was waiting for one of them to make a mistake and to drop their guard.

The taller of the two moved first. He tried to dash out from behind a large wooden crate and hide behind a thick concrete pillar, but thanks to the alcohol, his footing was unsteady and he went sprawling onto the floor.

Nora stayed her hand. The raider looked pathetic and helpless despite the bladed tire iron that he grasped in his left hand; she refused to shoot a man who was down.

“Leave now.” Her voice boomed out from her vantage point. “If you exit through those double doors right in front of you, I will let you live.”

The man on the ground struggled to his feet and looked directly at her. “Nah ya dumb bitch! When I get to ya, I’m gonna tear ya limb from limb.”

CRACK

His head wheeled back as Nora’s shot met its mark. The raider fell onto his back with a thud and a puddle of his blood stained the concrete floor.

“I'll give you the same offer.” She yelled to the final raider who was hiding behind a box in the corner. “If you leave now, I’ll let you live.”
She saw a pair of pale hands raise up in surrender followed by a mop of brilliant red hair that was braided into cornrows. The raider -- Nora couldn’t make out of it was a woman or a man -- sidestepped along the wall until they made it to the set of double doors.

Without a word, the raider slipped out of the room and let the door slam shut behind them. Once Nora was sure there were no more raiders in hiding, she holstered the pistol and made her way towards the metal ramp that led to the brewery floor.

Hancock whistled appreciatively as he checked the pockets of the nearest raider. A handful of bottlecaps, a couple of spent psycho syringes, and a handful of loose bullets were swept into a burlap sack. “Damn sister, if I didn’t know any better I woulda said you were born and raised in the wasteland like the rest of us. That was some damn fine shooting.”

Nora was silently pleased at his praise and then fired back, her words still charged with adrenaline, “Yeah, no thanks to you. What happened? Did you fall asleep on me?”

“Nah.” He chuckled. “You looked like ya had everything taken care of. I didn’t wanna get in yer way.”

The next raider had crumpled up old Boston Bugle newspapers to line the inside of his jacket with insulation. He had nothing else except some threadbare jeans, combat boots with holes in the toes, and a rusty lead pipe. These raiders weren’t just hard on their luck, they were on their last legs.

“God, why are they so young?” Nora mourned as she turned over the body of a young boy with dirty blond hair. His face was smeared with blood, war paint, and he was sporting a puffy black eye. He couldn’t be more than fourteen.

“These kids were probably homeless most of their lives.” Hancock replied. He saw it every day and it never got easier.

“But why?” Nora asked. “Surely both of his parents can’t be dead.”

Hancock smirked sadly at Nora’s naivety and moved to the last raider in the room. She was the one who insulted Nora. She was a girl of eighteen or nineteen. Her rough metal armor did nothing to hide her breasts, in fact it was probably made to accentuate them even more, and the trousers that she wore were stained and bloody. He didn’t even bother looting her corpse. Her armor had no pockets and the copious track marks along her inner arms indicated that she had probably consumed any of the chems that she once had.

“The wasteland will chew up and spit out anyone. Doesn’t matter if yer rich, poor, raider, scavver, or the fuckin’ Mayor. I’ve seen far too many folks orphaned by the wasteland.”

“You mean folks like you?” Nora replied quietly.

“Yeah, sister.” He agreed and met her gaze. “Folks like me.”

Hancock’s dark eyes brooded over the fallen raiders. Killing others in self-defense didn’t phase him. Hell, even killing raiders to steal their food or chems was just par for the course when trying to survive in the wasteland. Still, seeing all the death and destruction he wrought wasn’t a easy pill to swallow, even if it was necessary.

The duo dragged the four bodies outside in silence. Hancock suggested that they roll them into the river so no other wasteland critters would stop by in the night to get an easy meal. Nora agreed and she helped the ghoul push the raiders’ bodies out into the frigid sea.
After the last body floated out of sight, Hancock draped his coarse, warm jacket over Nora’s bare shoulders. She pulled the garment around herself and smelled the fabric: it smelled like a pleasant combination of earthy smoke and abraxo laundry detergent.

“C’mon, sunshine. Let’s get ya inside before ya catch yer death. I wanna show you something.”

Truthfully, her bare arms were pink from the cold so she let herself be guided back into the taphouse without protest.

Once inside, he guided her into a back room where a rusted robot stood deactivated.

“What is that?” Nora exclaimed. The poor, rusted robot looked like it had been a Protectron in a past life, but the augmentations done to its hull had widened its chest into a barrel-like shape that looked eerily similar to a beer keg.

“Accordin’ to the terminal, this bucket of bolts is called Drinkin’ Buddy!” Hancock replied and he typed a command in to a nearby computer. “Them people over in the Rexford were lookin’ for him. They were willing to pay some nice caps to whoever could find him and send him to Goodneighbor. Thankfully, I found him first, and I’ve been misleading any other prospectors with false tips. Call me selfish, but an invention of this caliber is special, ya feel me? I couldn’t just go sell him off to the highest bidder.”

Nora’s grinned and placed her hand on it’s cool, rusted hull. The metal was chilled and vibrated slightly.

“Does it still work?” She asked.

“Stand back.” Hancock replied and hit the enter key with a dramatic flourish. Steam poured from the back of the machine and a weird chugging sound like a train engine came from the middle of it’s hull.

“Drinkin’ Buddy is online.” The robot chirped. The robot’s voice wasn’t any different than the authoritative and firm voice of a Protectron worker.

“I hope ya like beer.” Hancock replied with a grin and a wink. He had obviously powered up the robot before, but Nora wondered how often he came to the taphouse for a drink … or for several, and with whom.

“Um…what kind of beer does it have?” Nora inquired.

The robot turned to her. A small amount of steam came out of its back end, and Nora realized that the steam was actually frozen water vapor.

“We serve the finest beer in all of Boston: Gwinnet Ale.”

The words Gwinnet Ale were spoken by a female’s cool, seductive voice and Nora assumed that the sound byte was pulled from an advertisement.

“Do you have any other choices?” Nora asked.

“Request not processed. Default welcome will commence.” The robot replied and then stuttered, “We — we serve the fi — i —nest beer in all of Boston: Gwinnet Ale.”

She sighed, “Okay, I’ll have one.”
“Wonderful! Please dispense money now.” The robot replied.

“I got ya, sunshine.” Hancock grinned and dropped one single bottle cap into the coin slot. “We can get our money back by opening up its back paneling.”

“Thank you sir or madam for your purchase.” Drinkin’ Buddy said as jovially as a robot could. “Your refreshing beverage is now being dispensed.”

A loud clanging was heard and a brown bottle clunked into the vertical beverage slot. “Please enjoy Gwinnet Ale. The finest beer in all of Boston!”

Nora took the bottle out and marveled at how the glass froze her hand. Hancock popped off the bottle cap with the blunt end of his knife and the beer fizzed all over their hands.

“I can’t believe it’s refrigerated!” Nora exclaimed as she licked the foam off the back of her hand. “I don’t think I’ve had alcohol this cold since before the bombs!”

Although Nora preferred her beer a bit lighter than the darker, bitter brew of the Gwinnet Ale, simply drinking something cold was refreshing and Nora downed half the bottle much to Hancock’s grin and appreciation.

“Hey Buddy, we’re gonna need two more.” Hancock replied and led their new companion up the ramp and back into the bar.

“Right away sir or madam.” The robot replied. Ice and condensation trailed after the robot in a lazy cloud.

“So has our date officially started?” Nora asked lightly, almost shyly.

“Sunshine, our date started as soon as you kicked in the door to this place.” He replied and placed a warm hand on her back. “Like I said, I ain’t exactly the wine and roses type.”

“No,” Nora smirked, “You’re more of the beer and killing things type?”

“Exactly, sunshine. Exactly.”

“Can I ask you a question?” Nora sighed.

Her head rested against Hancock’s shoulder and the pleasant buzz from the cold beer was making her face feel flushed and hot. Drinkin’ Buddy was wandering around the vacant bar. It’s steam-powered hydraulics wooshed and clanged with each step. But the sounds fell on deaf ears. Hancock and Nora were sitting at the bar next to each other. If it had been 200 years earlier, they would’ve looked like the typical ‘one more round’ types when the bar was getting ready to close. But now, they were just two people drinking away evening.

“Sure, sunshine.”

“How did you meet Fahrenheit?” She asked and then immediately clarified, “I’m not asking because I’m jealous — which I’m not. I was curious. You seem to trust her completely which is a rare thing.”

Hancock chuckled and sighed. “Ho boy, this story is gonna require a bit more booze to tell.”

He passed Nora another cold beer and reached over the bar to pour himself another three fingers of whisky.
When their eyes met again, Hancock smirked coyly. He almost seemed embarrassed. “The story ain’t exactly my most glorified moment, ya know.”

“Oh c’mon.” She replied. “Who am I to judge? You’ve witnessed several of my inglorious moments first hand. I mean, you were there when I nearly died of radiation sickness.”

“If memory serves, I believe the deathclaw woulda killed ya first.”

“Still, the point stands.” Nora replied and lightly punched the ghoul’s arm.

He smiled ruefully and then began his story in an even, low voice. “Fahr and I met kinda accidentally. She was a merc for Marowski at the time, and I was one of the guy’s biggest clients. The guy’s Jet is second-to-none which makes him susceptible to all sort of assholes who want more than their fair share, ya feel me.”

“Were you one of the assholes?” Nora asked with a wry smile.

“Sure was.” He replied with an unabashedly proud smirk. “So me and a couple of thugs were gonna rough Marowski’s guy up while he was on his way to Diamond City. We figured that a man goin’ down in the wasteland wasn’t impossible, after all, Marowski’s a motherfuckin’ tight ass and never sent more than one man who was armed with nothin’ but a gun cobbled together with duct tape and shoe strings. That is until he sent Fahr.”

Hancock passed a lit cigarette to Nora who accepted it gratefully and then took a short hit of Jet. The warm smoke caressed her throat and lungs pleasantly and the nicotine kept the damp chill of the evening at bay. Both of their smoke clouds mingled in the dusty, dim light.

“So there I was, waitin’ in ambush for some pipsqueak of a guy and this fuckin’ man with tits comes up behind me and clocks me one. I didn’t go down all the way but I did start seein’ double. So I grab my knife from my boot and start stabbin’ at anything and everything that moved. I was crazed and enraged. But I was also scared because I knew how much of an idiot I was bein’. Here I was, some snot-nosed, freshly-turned ghoul and here I thought I could make a play far bigger than myself by stealin’ from Marowski.”

“What did Fahrenheit do?” Nora replied.

Hancock let out a raspy chuckle, “She did what she was gettin’ paid to do. She fucked me up real good and left my sorry ass broken and bleedin’ in the street. When I came to, she left my wrinkled ass naked as the day I was born and she had a note tacked into my shoulder. It said, ‘Next time, don’t be fuckin’ stupid’.”

“-- for a feral?” He finished for her and took a long drink from his glass. “They sure as hell did. When I walked myself back into Goodneighbor, everyone and their mother opened fire on me. I still got the bullet hole scars on my ass to prove it. When the dust finally settled and when I spun a tale about some drunkin’ and chemmed out orgy that I had taken apart of, she walks right up to me with a shit-eatin’ grin and asked me if I had fallen in the river because this” -- he gestured at his crotch -- “was unimpressive.”

Nora snorted and then giggled. Her snort was anything but lady-like, but she was too many beers in to care. “That’s a helluva first impression.”

Hancock rasped out a cackle that echoed hers and continued, “So, after the whole business with Vic was over and I was appointed Mayor, I knew that I needed someone who wasn’t afraid to put
me in my place. All good leaders have those checks and balances and shit. So, I asked Fahrenheit to be my number two and to run the Neighborhood Watch. It took some convincing, partly because she thought I’d get lynched by some of Vic’s last loyal supporters, but eventually she came around. The woman ain’t even thirty yet and she’s been servin’ me for nearly ten years. Longest relationship I’ve ever been in.”

Nora felt a spark of jealousy at that and she spoke before she could stop herself. “By relationship, do you mean it’s a platonic business relationship, or --”

Hancock stopped Nora and looked at her. Pink tinged her cheeks and she couldn’t meet his eyes. Her envy and embarrassment was too fuckin’ cute, he thought.

“I’m gonna be straight with you sunshine. We’ve fucked, a few times in fact, but our relationship could never get past bein’ physical. We tried for something more about four years in but our personalities are just too different. She and I are like gasoline and a match. We’re both passionate and sex was fuckin’ amazing but afterwards everything else was just empty.”

Nora nodded awkwardly and took another swig of beer. She knew that her face was still flushed in embarrassment.

Hancock chuckled and pulled her so close that she was nearly straddling his lap and pulled her beer from her hand.

“Hey.” She complained and then pouted. Hancock’s dark eyes caught hers and his hand gently cupped the side of her face. His skin was warm, almost feverish, and she watched as he downed the last bit of her beer with one long swill.

“Here you go, sir and madam.” Drinkin’ Buddy said. “One more beer of our best Gwinnet Ale.”

Nora grabbed at the cold bottle before Hancock could steal it from her, but the smirk that seemed to be permanently plastered on his face told her that he was just messing around.

“Ya need my knife, sunshine?”

“No, I got it.” She grinned. She found an edge of the wooden bar that hadn’t quite rotted away and placed the lip of the bottle cap on it’s edge. Seeing Hancock’s curious expression, she then replied “I learned this in college.”

Nora brought her fist down on top of the bottle cap and watched in satisfaction as the small black metal popped off and clattered onto the floor.

“Damn, sister.” Hancock grinned. “That’s pretty fuckin’ slick.”

“I didn’t go to college for three years for nothin’” She replied and brought the bottle to her lips. By now, the beer’s assertive bitterness had calmed down and the warm buzzing feeling was spreading into her fingers.

Hancock cleared his throat and his hands returned to their original places: drinking his whisky and fiddling with his shirrtails where his flag belt should’ve been. “So I told you my story. Now it’s your turn. What about you and Nate? How did you two meet?”

Besides Ellie, she never really talked about Nate with anyone other than Hancock. She remembered their long discussion outside the Starlight Drive In about the early days with baby Shaun. Back then, Nora thought that talking about Nate would hurt, but it actually felt good; it was like massaging a sore muscle.
She scoffed, “You’re gonna laugh.”

“Oh c’mon.” He replied.

“No, I can already tell.” She replied. “You’re gonna smirk and then you’re gonna say the same thing that you always say. ‘You both are two fuckin’ cute.’”

“What if I promise to not say that?” Hancock responded earnestly. “C’mon. Would it help if I said ‘please’?”

Nora rolled her eyes and sighed. “Fine. I was a freshman down at Suffolk Law School and there was this diner up in Cambridge. My friends and I went there after classes because the sandwiches were cheap and because it was close to the bar scene. Nate was working the counter there and I thought he was cute. I kept stealing glances over to him and would look away when he looked back. I thought I was being a fool but I left a good tip on my way out. He gave us all a takeout menu and told us that Saturday’s special was the corned beef on pumpernickel. I hate corned beef, but I was back the next day anyway.”

Hancock’s grinned but to his credit he held himself together. “What the hell’s corned beef and pumpernickel?”

Now it was Nora’s turn to smile. Of course Hancock wouldn’t know about Pre War deli food, especially not when most of their food choices had a tendency to fight back when attacked.

“Beef is meat that comes from a cow. To make corned beef, you preserve it with salt or soak it in a salt water mixture and pumpernickel is a type of bread.”

The ghoul nodded as though he understood but Nora saw that Hancock had no clue about what she was talking about. “It doesn’t matter though.” She replied, “Our story was pretty predictable I guess. You know? Girl meets boy. Girl get’s knocked up by boy. Boy goes to war. Girl and Boy give birth to …”

The rest of the sentence died on her lips. The pain and emptiness were back. Nora could feel them creeping into her mind like an uninvited guest. She rose off the bar stool abruptly and rushed towards the bathroom but Hancock caught her arm.

“Hey. Hey. None of that now. Don’t go hiding from me, sunshine. You have nothing to be ashamed of here. None of that shit from your past is your fault.”

“Of course it’s my fault!” She replied. “None of this would be happening if I didn’t get pregnant. Nate and I wouldn’t have had a shotgun wedding, we wouldn’t have moved to Sanctuary Hills, we wouldn’t have been frozen for 200 years, and Nate wouldn’t be dead.”

Hancock shook his head, “That’s bullshit.”

“What?”

“Ya heard me, sunshine. D’you wanna know what would’ve happened if ya hadn’t gotten pregnant? You would be just like every other skeleton out here. Maybe ya would be in some apartment near Lexington with yer family. Maybe you’d be in the street gutter. Maybe you’d be nowhere because yer bones turned to dust. What I’m sayin’ is I’m thrilled ya got knocked up. I’m thrilled you married Nate. I’m thrilled you made it outta the vault because all of those things kept you alive.”
“And ya know what?” He continued. “All this shit that you’ve dealt with since climbin’ outta that vault, that’s water under the bridge. When are you gonna accept that this is your life now, for better or worse?”

“I’ll accept it once I stop Father from destroying the world.” Nora replied.

“And you got me and Nicky to help ya do that. But for now, just enjoy what ya’ve got. Cry if ya need to, but don’t get swept away by the shit ya can’t change.”

Nora scrutinized him. She didn’t know whether to be annoyed or comforted. All of this was easy for him to say. Hancock went through his life with his devil-may-care attitude because he had no one to worry about. He lived in the moment and for the moment. How could she let go everything that has happened? Did she even want to?

“Sunshine…”

Hancock broke through the cloud that loomed over her thoughts and gently held onto her hand.

“I never told you about Shaun, did I? About what happened to him?” Nora’s voice was hollow.

“He died, sunshine.” Hancock replied gently and brought her hands to his rough lips and kissed them. “You told me, remember? Back in the State House? You said he was dead.”

Nora shook her head and grabbed onto Hancock’s rough, calloused hands as though he was the life raft that was keeping her from drowning.

“I said that he was dead to me.” Nora replied. “My son is still very much alive. He — He goes by Father now and he’s the leader of the Institute.”

The truth hit Hancock like a chunk of bricks and his mouth fell open. Everything made sense; everything about Nora — her warnings for them, and her cooperation as a courser — fell into place like the last crucial puzzle piece.

“Shit, Nora. I — I …” Hancock was at a loss for words. Everything that came to his mind seemed so inconsequential. “… I — That’s just fucked up.”

Nora chuckled sadly, “Yes. Yes it is.”

“Then fuck what I said about water under the bridge. I fuckin’ run my mouth when I’ve been drinking.” Hancock replied.

Fat tears plopped onto Nora’s cheeks as her body shook with relieved laughter and she brushed the salty liquid away with the back of her hand.

“Thanks,” She replied and kissed him on the cheek. She didn’t pull away and Hancock gently held onto her shoulders.

“For what, sunshine?”

“For just empathizing with me. For not trying to fix the situation … or me. For watching my back.”

“Anytime, sunshine.” Hancock replied and helped Nora to her feet. “C’mon now. It’s past our bedtimes.”

The duo stumbled unsteadily to the office next to the bar which had a small loveseat and a metal framed bed crammed in the room next to a modest wooden office desk. Aside for a wall safe that
had already been looted, the furnishings in the room were spartan but useable.

Hancock lit candles while Nora busied herself with laying out their bedding and stockpiled food. Daisy was nice enough to let them borrow a couple of wool blankets and a thin sleeping bag, so Nora made up a bed and then turned to Hancock who was watching her carefully.

Here it was. The moment of truth. The unspoken question was between them. Would they be sharing the bed? Nora’s answer didn’t jump to the forefront right away, but she also didn’t have the heart or the inclination to relegate Hancock to the couch.

Even though the beer had eased her anxiety, she couldn’t anticipate if or when she’d go postal if he said the wrong thing or did something that reminded her of Ayo. The uncertainty crushed her; she felt broken.

“You okay, sunshine?” Hancock rasped.

“I … um,” she began and took a step back until the back of her legs met the edge of the bed. How could she say this out loud?

“Nora?” Hancock reached out for her. His concern for her was touching, but her haunting look was even more dour in the dying candlelight.

“I’m sorry. I know this is our first time we’ve been properly together, but I just don’t know how this is gonna go for me. But I really want to but —” She swallowed thickly and flushed in shame. No, not just shame but from frustration and even a little anger; she had been robbed, robbed of having normal intimacy with someone else and it wasn’t fair.

“Nora, look at me.” He replied and made contact with her. His rough skin gently caressed her goose-pimpled flesh. She accepted his touch and let him pull her back towards him. His other rough hand gently cupped her cheek and he placed a chaste kiss to her forehead. “You ain’t gotta do shit with me, sunshine.”

A sigh of relief mingled with a sigh of regret.

“I know that,” she murmured, “But I want to, dammit!”

Just hearing her saying that made Hancock’s blood race through his veins. “Then let’s at least try.” He suggested with a wolfish grin.

Nora pulled away from him and shook her head. “I want to but … God, I can’t. I just -- I just don’t know how it’ll go for me. What if I think of him? What if I freak out and hurt you accidentally? What if it’s terrible for both of us? What if --”

“Woah, woah!” Hancock interrupted before she could spiral any further, “You ain’t gonna hurt me -- I’ve played rough before, and I can take it -- and doing anything with you, even just sleepin’ next to ya, would be great for me.”

Nora looked doubtful. He was probably just placating her and telling her what she wanted to hear. She seriously doubted that a sexual man like Hancock who had been abstinent for the longest span of his lifetime was just gonna pass at the opportunity of having sex again.

He gathered her up in his arms and held her against his chest. The warmth radiating from his body was soothing. “Look, if you’re really dead set on hookin’ up with me, then I ain’t gonna stop ya.” He gave her a lopsided, dopey grin and she chuckled despite herself.
Then he grew serious again, “You’re the boss, Nora. Ya tell me what you want, and I’ll do it. I’ll do anything for ya, sunshine.”

“John, that’s very --”

“-- I’m fuckin’ serious.” He interjected and gently brushed aside her shorn, uneven hair and cupped her cheek. She sighed and leaned in to his touch and bit back a moan. “God, yer wound up so tight that I’m worried that you may spontaneously combust!”

His hand traveled slowly down her cheek, across her lips and chin, down the side of her neck, and rested at the side of her chest tantalizingly close to cupping one of her breasts over the dress. Her heartbeat thudded like a steady drumbeat but her breathing was nearly nonexistent.

His hand seemed to tremble slightly, but it remained perched just to the right of her right breast. She desperately wanted his touch but instead the fabric of the dress rubbed against her sensitive nipples stoking both her frustration and desire. Still, she couldn’t find the words to demand anything from him.

“That motherfucker can’t get to you anymore, Nora. Especially not when you’re the one in charge here.”

“So, what” she replied lightly, her voice sounding breathy and so unlike herself, “you want me to be some sort of dominatrix?”

Hancock let out a rasping chuckle, “I was thinkin’ more like we just start off slowly, ya know. Maybe we both work ourselves over together and see how you feel after that. But I’m up for some whips and leather if you are.”

Nora blushed and rolled her eyes at the thought of her standing over him will a ball gag in his mouth. She didn’t mind taking the lead once in awhile, but a dominatrix she was not.

“So what do you mean by ‘work ourselves over together’?”

Hancock’s wolfish grin was back. “I mean that you and me get comfy on this bed together and we take care of our needs by ourselves. Ya know? Otherwise, I can let you have the room for a bit so you can get some alone time, and I’ll take care of myself outside. Wouldn’t be the first time for me.” He winked at her.

Nora was baffled, and aroused, at his proposition. Although she didn’t spent much time doing self-care like this when she was married to Nate, Nora enjoyed the act ever since she discovered how it everything worked ‘down there’ when she was eleven.

“Would you touch me?” She asked. Her face must’ve been beet red by now, but the fire that was simmering in her gut overrode her pride and propriety.

“D’you want me to?” He asked. His voice was husky with need.

“Yes.” She nearly replied with 'fuck yes' but restrained herself. “And I want you to -- to try and kiss me when I tell you to.” She replied. “If I can get through that, then I think I’ll feel less anxious about the other stuff.”

Hancock nodded and stood next to the bed. Nora followed suit and they both began undressing quickly and quietly. She undid the zipper on the dress and shimmied out of the garment while Hancock draped his nondescript grey jacket over a chair.
“I’m gonna keep the shirt on, sunshine. Is that okay with you?”

His white shirt was loose fitting and the v-neck showed off a patch of red and tan mottled skin on his chest. The shirt gave him a pirate captain vibe that she could appreciate.

“Yeah, that’s fine.” She replied and turned her back so she could pull off the basic cotton panties that Nick had recovered from the clothes that she bought from Fallon’s in Diamond City. Yet, even in the dark, Hancock could see everything perfectly. Seeing Nora pull the fabric off her hips and down her toned ass was one of the most erotic things he had ever seen in his life.

Hancock pulled his trousers off from beneath the sleeping bag and moved towards the wall so Nora could lay down next to him. Nora’s arms covered her breasts as she slid in next to him and pulled the covers up to her neck.

“When was the last time you’ve done this, sunshine?” He asked partly out of curiosity and partly out of necessity.

“Done what? Touch myself with an audience?” Now that she was under the covers, she didn’t feel so exposed and rolled onto her side to face him. “I’ve never had an audience before ... At least not a captive audience. My mother accidentally walked in on me once. The moment was so mortifying for the both of us that I didn’t touch myself for nearly a year afterwards. And when I was with Nate ...” She swallowed thickly at the memory. “I never felt the need when I was with him. We had a very active sex life until he deployed.”

Hancock nodded. “I only ask cuz I think doing this for yourself will help you feel more in control, ya feel me?”

Nora nodded but said nothing. Dr. Amari had encouraged her to do the very same thing -- just without an audience -- when she was counseling Nora. The discussion was awkward for both women, and Nora simply nodded and let Amari get through her clinical spiel of “reestablishing her boundaries.”

Instead, Nora turned onto her back and stared at the wood ceiling while her fingers gently and lightly traced from her clavicle, down her breasts, over her hardened nipples, and along her stomach.

Meanwhile, Hancock’s hand was stroking himself languidly and steadily beneath the sleeping bag. His eyes were closed and his mouth was slightly parted. Apparently it didn’t take him too long to get into the mood. Nora rested her head back against the mattress and slowly and gently ran her fingers along her inner thighs and through the patch of soft hair that guarded her sex.

She repeated this pattern several times. On one pass, she’d linger around her nipples and tease the hardened buds with the soft pads of her fingers. She imagined that her hands were Hancock’s: rough, calloused, and confident. When she cupped her right breast, she imagined how it would feel to have his waist between her legs as she rutted against him like a woman possessed.

She whimpered in need at the thought and moved her attention to the aching wetness between her legs. Thoughts of Ayo’s rough fingers penetrating her intruded into her mind like a dark cloud, but she pushed away the thoughts as quickly as they came. Hancock wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t intentionally cause her pain.

She then heard his voice in her ears: *So a normal human can make you wet.* Her eyes shot open and she looked sideways at Hancock who was watching her with dark, hungry eyes.
“You okay?” He panted lightly. Cool relief flooded over her body nearly instantaneously upon hearing his voice.

Nora nodded and turned her attentions back on her task. She was absolutely soaked and she did that to herself. Her arousal now was worlds apart from the way her body reacted to Ayo’s assault. Back there, her body reacted to survive. Now, her body nearly sang in need for the ghoul lying next to her. Ayo could never take that from her.

Two fingers trailed through her warm wetness several times. Her entire core ached and burned as she made several swipes from her clit to her vagina. Every time she passed that bundle of nerves, her body crackled with electric pleasure. Closing her eyes, she repeated the process several times and she began thrusting her hips up to meet her fingers to achieve a deeper penetration.

Her own senses dulled and Ayo disappeared from her thoughts completely. Her mind focused on her sole objective. It was as though reaching climax was the only thing that mattered in the history of the world. She was so focused that she couldn’t hear Hancock’s steady panting as he worked himself into a frenzy. Nor did she notice that his eyes drank in the sight of her hips bucking against her fingers. Nor did she feel the chilly night breeze on her breasts and her thigh as the jostled blankets had slipped off her body. No, she was too focused on her ending, her completion.

“Please…” “Oh God.” She whimpered as her fingers encircled her clit frantically before delving back again.

“Yess.” She heard Hancock hiss. She cracked open her eyes and saw that he had thrown the covers off of himself was was pumping frantically into his own hand.

“Yes, fuck!” She moaned and turned towards him again. Her thighs were parted and one of her legs was intertwined with Hancock’s. She was too far gone to care about embarrassment, fear, or propriety. She needed to come. She needed Hancock to come with her. To do this together.

“John…” She moaned out.

When Hancock locked eyes with Nora, he seemed to communicate with her wordlessly. They knew what the other desperately needed, and they both were eager to obey.

Nora reluctantly removed her own hand from her dripping wetness and gently caressed her palm along the ghoul’s mottled thigh. Her fingers glided easily over his rough skin leaving a trail of her arousal on the way to her quarry. Like his bald head, he was hairless everywhere which Nora found unique and strangely appealing. Her hand glided to the base of his shaft and she gently took hold of him. He let out a rasping moan and bucked into her hand. His member was hot to the touch and it seemed to pulse in her hand like it had a heartbeat of its own.

Nora gently ran her palm from shaft to tip. Pre-come coated her already lubricated fingers and she pumped him firmly in her hand.

Likewise, Hancock’s touches were just as gentle and tentative at first. His rough fingers and their telltale texture was exquisite. He started at her chest and spent a fair amount of time holding her breasts in the palms of his hands. Although Nora was not remarkably chesty, Hancock could appreciate how her breasts moved when he caressed them. He seemed to drink in her moans when he teased and gently rolled her hardened nipples between his fingers.

“Tell me what you want, Nora.” He growled.

She couldn’t form the words but grabbed his left hand and nearly forced his fingers inside of
herself. “Please...” She wined.

“Sunshine, you’re so fuckin’ wet.” He murmured into her shoulder and gently teased her vulva and labia with gentle caresses. “God damn I love it.”

Nora bucked her hips in response. “Just f--fucking touch me, dammit.”

He grinned at first but let out a pained groan when Nora withdrew her hand from his aching cock.

“Please John, I need it.” She begged. “Help me finish.”

“Yes ma’am.” Hancock grinned. His fingers seemed to be working overtime. He seemed to be everywhere at once. Nora’s mouth fell slack. She had lost control of her own body and trembled uncontrollably. Her orgasm was so close.

“That’s it, sunshine. Let it go.” He growled encouragingly in her ear.

Nora looked at him through half-lidded, unfocused eyes and nodded. She firmly guided Hancock’s hand to the spot she desperately needed him to touch. As she balanced precariously on that edge of her orgasm, Hancock abandoned his own cock and hopped over Nora’s thigh to settle between her legs.

Hancock’s left hand rested gently against her mons as his thumb resumed its unrelenting pace against her clit while his other hand slowly and gently teased her sopping entrance.

“More!” She nearly wailed and Hancock’s looked ravenous.

He gently but quickly inserted one finger and then another. He firmly rubbed the bit of rough tissue that was just inside her pulsing entrance and that was all it took for Nora to plummet off the precipice.

Her hips arched off the bed and she heard an obscene squelching sound that she didn’t realize was from her. She wailed unintelligibly but Hancock didn’t relent. Another orgasm came closely on the heels of the first until they seemed to blend in her mind.

Hancock said something. His voice was husky and lustful, but Nora heard nothing except the sound of her relieved moans and the pounding of her own heartbeat in her ears. When it became too much, Nora’s hands shot down and caught Hancock’s and pulled him towards her. She trembled involuntarily and she gasped for air like a dying fish.

“God damn...” She croaked out.

“You can say that again, sunshine.” He replied with a hungry grin and plopped down next to Nora. His hands were drenched and each rivet and bump along his thick fingers glistened in the dying candlelight. His hands resumed the work that he had started and he fisted his turgid cock quickly.

“I wanna help you come.” Nora whispered hoarsely. She was fighting against the calming orgasm-induced drowsiness.

“You did good, sunshine.” Hancock replied, plopping back down next to her. He saw that she could barely keep her eyes open. “But I’ve had a long time to practice on myself. This will be pretty damn quick. You gave me more than enough inspiration to work with.”

Nora forced herself to stay awake. She wanted to see Hancock lose himself because of her. Sure enough, in a matter of minutes, his hips bucked up into his hands and he let out a raspy moan.
“Oh Nora!”

His hand pumped against his cock once, twice, and then a third time as ejaculate coated his fist and lower stomach.

Even when she was intimate with Nate, she had never seen a man ejaculate onto himself before (mostly because Nate had never finished anywhere other than inside of her). The sight was erotic.

Hancock pulled out a handkerchief that he had stashed on his side of the mattress and cleaned himself up, tossed the soiled garment onto the floor by the foot of the bed, and then turned onto his side.

“C’mere, sunshine.” He panted and pulled her closer to him. His eyes were half closed and the details of his face were now impossible to see in the darkness, but Nora could almost feel the content smile he had on his face as she had a similar grin plastered on hers.

“John, can you kiss me?”

“Of course,” He murmured and pulled her in for a gentle kiss. Nora’s lips was sluggish and languid; sleep was closing in quickly on her and when they broke apart, Nora rested her forehead against his warm chest.

“Thank you.” She murmured. “That was …”

“Amazing.” He finished for her and drew the quilt up over their shoulders. “You’re amazing.”

She chuckled and molded herself against his body. She could hear his heart thumping steadily. The dark thoughts about Ayo were gone. She knew that he’d never haunt her dreams again, at least not when she was laying next to a man so entirely different than any man she’s ever met.

Nobody could replace John Hancock. Not in her fantasies. And not even in her nightmares.

“John, I love you.” She murmured as sleep swept her away.
Thank you to everyone who has left kudos and reviews. I appreciate the support and I hope you're enjoying the story. Enjoy the extra Nora/Hancock scene that fell out of my mind at the last minute. Oh, and Nick will be back in the next chapter. These moments of intimacy are nice, but I miss writing about the ol' synth detective.

Chapter 11 -- Hunted

Nora awoke automatically; her internal clock told her that it was early. The morning sun that peaked through the boarded up window was grey and hazy. It couldn’t be any earlier than sunrise, but Nora wasn’t tired. She rubbed at her eyes and stretched beneath the thin flannel-lined sleeping bag. She was comfortably warm and content and couldn’t wipe the shit-eating grin off her face if she tried.

She had sex with Hancock. Well, for all intents and purposes, it was close enough to count. And, it was good...no, dammit, it was phenomenal. She turned to the man next to her and rolled onto her side. His back was to her and he was clutching a pillow against his chest and snoring softly. Mayor Hancock the bad ass, take-no-shit, self-turned ghoul looked as content as a kitten with a ball of yarn. Nora couldn’t help but snort in amusement.

“Too fuckin’ cute.” She murmured, mimicking his ghoulish drawl, and then turned to tuck her body against him, but then changed her mind. She wanted to explore, so Nora peeked under the covers to get a better look at Hancock in all his glory.

The most unusual feature about him was that his skin was a patchwork of color and texture. At first, she wondered if his skin ever became too sensitive or too painful. There were a few patches of tan, rough skin on his bicep and his hip that still had fine whips of fair, downy body hair, so it turned out that ghouls and hair-loss wasn't always consistent. Amid the red blistered skin along his triceps and the thick sinewy tendons that stretched along his neck and shoulders, Nora could see the faint marks and scars from previous battles.

She lightly traced her fingers along the side of his abdomen where it looked like a sword or some other type of blade had cut him. The scar was hard and a deep red that looked almost purple. She assumed that the scar was relatively new.

Her eyes took note of how the muscles beneath his mottled skin coiled and tensed at the slightest stimulus. She also noticed the small dimples that peppered his lower back and buttocks and had to bite her fist to keep from laughing loud enough to wake him. Apparently his story about the Goodneighbor citizens mistaking him as a feral was true.

Nora tucked herself against the heat of his back and draped her arm over his waist. He murmured something unintelligible and then rolled onto his back, coughed once, and began snoring again.

She smirked and scooted herself down a bit and lifted up the covers once again. This time, her eyes caught sight of his flaccid manhood and she felt the heat of arousal pool in her stomach. She didn’t get a decent look last night, partially because it was dark in the room and her exploration of his
body was more based off touch. In the daylight, however, Nora took in the sight gleefully.

He was indeed hairless down there, but the velvety skin that she remembered holding in her hand was remarkably textured as well. He was uncut but Nora didn’t find that unusual, Nate was too, but she did notice that Hancock’s manhood had stood up well against the ravages of the radiation drug compared to the rest of his body. Aside for a slight divot on the right side of his shaft and another on the underside of his foreskin, he looked as normal as one could expect for a ghoul.

“Either there’s a hole in this sleepin’ bag, sunshine or you’re gettin’ a pretty good eyeful.” He murmured, his voice thick and rough from sleep.

Nora jumped at the sound of his voice and then set the sleeping bag down. She looked guiltily at Hancock’s smug grin but he smiled gently.

“No need to look guilty, sunshine. All you gotta do is ask. I ain’t shy.”

“I was curious, that’s all.”

Hancock turned to her and stroked the side of her face with the back of his rough hand. “No harm in being curious, sunshine. Fair’s fair. I gotta look at your knockout body in all kinds of ways last night.”

Nora thought back to the night before and remembered how she arched into Hancock’s touch as he brought her off with his hands. The memory was nearly as arousing as the act was and she bit her lower lip to keep from shuddering.

“You’re beautiful, Nora.” He murmured and kissed her gently. She could still taste the bitter hops from her beer and the oaky aftertaste from his whisky. Although not ideal, Nora didn’t want to stop anything just so she could dig out her toothpaste for a quick freshening up. That would happen later after they were both spent and tired. Now, Nora wanted Hancock, and she wanted him properly this time.

“John, I want to fuck you.” She whispered and kissed his jaw and then nipped at the junction between his ear and his neck.

The growl she heard was animalistic and he pulled her on top of him. "Didn't you have your fill last night?"

Nora shook her head and coyly replied, "I mean, we didn't actually do the deed. I wanna change that."

"You change it all you want, sunshine." He grinned and pulled her down to capture her lips in a searing kiss. His dark eyes pierced hers; they were full of lust and passion. “Take what you want, Nora. I’ll give you anything.”

She smirked and shivered as his hands ran from her shoulder blades, down her back, and cupped her ass. There was no need for foreplay; after last night, Nora was ready for him. She reached down and felt for his cock expecting to have to work him over for a bit, but she found that the opposite was true. He was thick, hard, and more than ready for her; she teased him by dragging the tip through her slick folds.

He nearly snarled at the feeling and grabbed ahold of her hips trying to force her hips down onto his cock but her hands clamped over his. “No! Let me, John. Please.”

He saw the uncertainty in her eyes and he cursed at himself. He was eager, but Nora wasn’t ready
for dominance, at least not yet. “Sorry, sunshine. You just feel so fucking good.”

“I know. It’s just been … a long time since I’ve done this.” She panted and readjusted herself.

Hancock wanted to piece together what she meant by that, but her body on top of his was sufficiently distracting.

This time, his tip was poised at her entrance. All she had to do was lower her weight down and sheath herself on him. “Just let me do this.” She said again. “I’ll try not to tease. I just —“ Words failed her. Partially because her body was demanding that she shut the hell up and just fuck him, but also because this was the final barrier that was between them as a couple that she needed to break.

“Do it, sunshine.” His growl turned into a faint whimper.

Nora sank her weight down and her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Of all the sensations in the world, their union transcended the physical; it felt complete. He filled her deliciously and completely. They both moaned: Nora’s voice was light and breathy while Hancock’s came out as a low, pained groan.

“Fuck, sunshine.” He groaned. “You feel fuckin' amazing.”

Nora chuckled despite herself. She rocked back and forth atop Hancock. The telltale pressure she felt building in her abdomen was exciting, exquisite, and sorely missed. Clitoral stimulation was always electric and powerful, but the sensations that blossomed during proper intercourse were deeper, complex, and nuanced.

She perched herself forward and began rocking her hips up and down on Hancock’s shaft. She rested her forehead against his and then captured his ruined lips with hers. His tongue caressed hers, deepening the kiss, and she followed his lead. His kisses were hungry and borderline aggressive as he nipped at her lips in-between drawing breath.

With every slap of their hips, Nora whimpered and groaned at the sensations building in her stomach. She chased it like she did the night before; one hand grabbed firmly onto Hancock’s bicep for leverage while the other caressed her own breast.

Her end was coming too soon, she thought, so she slowed her pace and ran herself along his length from base to tip and then back again. Instead of the rough jerking motions of greedy lust, she rolled her hips towards him every time she sank to his base. Hancock’s hands cupped her ass and helped her maintain a steady rhythm while punctuating each slap of their body with a lustful hiss or groan.

“Nora, please.” Hancock begged. “You’re gonna make me come. Keep goin’.”

Her entire body flushed with pleasure at his confession. The way he said it was raw and honest. He was blunt and she loved that he didn’t tap-dance around sex with double entendres and vague hints.

Nora redoubled her efforts and resumed the steady pace of her ministrations. With every thrust down, she could feel the tension in her core coil and build.

Hancock’s grip was unyielding, but not painful, as he began to thrust upwards to meet her hips. The extra oomph from his efforts pushed Nora over the edge first.

She felt her body free falling; she felt simultaneously weightless and anchored to Hancock’s body. She lost herself in the pleasure as it swept her away. Seconds seemed to last minutes, and she wasn’t aware of how their moans coalesced to create one voice, nor was she aware of how the heat
and the wetness of Hancock’s ejaculate was what added a new dimension to her pleasure.

Their bodies stilled and Nora collapsed onto his chest. Her hair was plastered to her forehead by sweat and she shivered from the cold and from the aftershocks of her orgasm.

The ghoul gently rolled onto his side with Nora’s body still trembling around him. He loved the violence of a woman’s orgasm. He loved how some women could become possessed by the pleasure that they temporarily lost themselves in it. He gave Nora time to come back to Earth, back to him.

When he withdrew himself from her body, he reached over to grab the discarded towel and the bottle of purified water from the night before and gently cleaned up both of their bodies of sweat and cum. Nora mumbled and groaned as he gently wiped his evidence from her folds and thighs. Her body was oversensitive and her nerves were raw. Hancock couldn’t help but smirk with pride.

He pulled the sleeping bag up over them both and pulled her into his chest. “You okay, sunshine?”

A lazy, sleepy smile crossed her face and she nodded. “I’m amazing. We’re going another round once I wake up again.”

His laugh was smoky and he placed a chaste kiss to her forehead. “You’ll never hear me complain about that.”

“Good.” She murmured as she fell asleep.

From his vantage point on the third floor of an abandoned apartment building, he watched two people walk towards the ruins of Bunker Hill. The once famous war memorial had been repurposed into a crude settlement of some sort, but much like the rest of the commonwealth, the settlement was barely hanging on. Shacks dotted the perimeter and the few people that he could see were fighting the dusty land for its meager bounty.

Nothing looked the same as he had remembered it, but apparently this is what life was like after 200 years of nuclear destruction. Life was broken and dirty.

Still, he trained his sights back onto the two people whom he had been tailing. The intel he had been given about them was vague at best. He was told that his quarry would be traveling out of some hovel called Goodneighbor within a fortnight. The informant also told him about the civil unrest that was bubbling beneath the heart of the city. He assumed that his quarry would try to escape the city covertly, and he couldn’t stay in the city without drawing too much attention to himself. Instead, he found an overpass that conveniently overlooked the entire city. As long as he stayed out of sight, he could peer down on them. He was like a hawk hunting for field mice: silent and focused. That was four days ago.

Despite his mission, he had never been a patient man. It was a skill he had to acquire from his time in the military. And while he did eventually acquire it, perfecting it was another matter entirely. He had a lot of time to kill before he could move in on his target. In fact, the tongue-in-cheek phrase that his buddies would throw around during their down time of “hurry up and wait” was more apt now than it had ever been.

He could hear the raucous sounds of the city below him. He heard the music, the laughter, and the drunken arguing. He could see how Nora would be drawn to a place like this. Always the extrovert, she thrived at parties and this place seemed to be a non-stop party. He wondered if she called this place home. God, he hoped not.
Still, he never anticipated that they’d sneak out of the city in broad daylight. He wasn’t ready. They got the slip on him and disappeared into the cold daylight when he was trying to catch a few moments of sleep.

He thought he’d have to go back to square one, or worse, admit defeat, but fate or just pure dumb luck intervened. Later that night while he was scrounging through the ruins of an old Red Rocket gas station, the sound of muffled voices and the suspect splashing in the harbor led him back on the trail. Thank God for small favors.

She looked almost like her normal self, like Nora Pendleton, his wife and mother of their child. Her cheeks were tinged pink from the cold and she hugged her bare arms around herself to retain what little body heat she had. Dammit, why was she standing outside without a jacket? She’d surely catch her death.

The man with her, if he could call himself a man, draped a woolen grey suit jacket around her shoulders and led her back inside. With that one gesture, he felt the molten heat of jealousy bubble in his gut.

When the duo retreated into the taphouse, he settled himself in for another long night of waiting.

He tried to sleep a little but couldn’t. So he recounted the memories of his past. Some jumped to the forefront of his mind faster than others while some never returned to him at all. When it was time to confront Nora, he wanted to be the man she loved, not the one she mourned. But the pieces weren’t coming together as smoothly as he would’ve liked. There were gaps. He was told that memory transfers weren’t seamless, especially when they’ve been transferred from a body that had experienced traumatic brain injury courtesy of a gunshot wound to the head. Still, he tried to remember the man that he once was.

The duo emerged by midday the next morning. They had changed their clothes but looked no worse for wear. And so the hunt was on again.

They stopped in Bunker Hill to drop off the unwieldy burlap bag they had been carrying and switched it out with a pair of old military-issued backpacks. They planned to travel light which meant they still had a long ways to go.

Patience was a hard virtue to follow when he wanted nothing more than to approach her. Would she believe it was him? Would she cry? Would she run away in fear, or perhaps shoot him? The unknowns hurt worse than the dull pain that throbbed in his skull. He massaged his forehead and felt a cold chill course over his skin.

Although her hair was cropped in an odd fashion and she wore a brown bomber jacket over a plaid men’s work shirt, she looked healthy and happy. Still, he was so use to seeing her in pantsuits, black, navy, or grey skirts, and modest blouses. Her rough traveling clothes made her look almost masculine. It was a look that didn’t suit her.

Her companion, on the other hand, was odd in an entirely different way. Peering through binoculars, he could see that the man’s skin was blistered and raw-looking, like the way bacon bubbled on the griddles when he made BLTs for customers. Still he had a countenance about him that went beyond self assured and ventured into ‘cocky.’ The man seemed arrogant. He slapped Nora’s ass playfully and then blamed it on some invisible force. Nora’s squeals were so loud that he could hear them like bells chiming on the wind. He use to make Nora laugh and giggle like that. He already hated the disfigured man.

Once the duo were out of his line of sight, he quickly packed up his things, descended the rickety
fire escape that led to a cluster half-destroyed apartment buildings, and clambered down to the hard packed dirt. His eyes scanned the area for any movement and he listened closely for the sounds of enemies -- human or otherwise -- that may try to ambush him. When he was confident that the coast was clear, he ran down the nearest alleyway which cut behind a remarkably well-preserved victorian mansion.

He heard Nora’s mirthful laugh again, this time much closer to him, and he ducked into an abandoned corner convenience store. In his haste, he overturned a table that had two empty bottles and an assortment of aluminum cans. The metal and glass clinked and clattered to the scorched tile floor.

“What the fuck was that?” He heard Nora exclaim.

“You wait here, sunshine. I’ll check it out.” Her companion rasped harshly.

“Like hell you will. I’m coming too.” She protested.

He ducked beneath a shelf that had tipped over against the wall and pulled out a rectangle-shaped machine. He pressed the button and heard its electrical humming as he became cloaked in a stealth field. He pulled out his rifle just in case and waited.

He saw the ruined man first. His face was scarred beyond belief and his missing nose and coal black eyes made him look like a demon that had crawled his way out of Hell.

The visible muscles in the disfigured man’s jaw clenched in anticipation of a fight. It was a gesture that was simultaneously unsettling and gruesome. He knew that one well placed shot would put this thing down for good.

But before he could even move his finger towards the trigger, Nora carefully climbed over the rubble with her own pistol drawn and ready. He bit his tongue to keep himself from calling out to her. Her eyes scanned the area and she moved like she had been trained in combat. She moved like a soldier, he realized.

“I don’t see anyone, sunshine.” The disfigured man rasped.

“Perhaps they’re hiding out. Or perhaps they’re using a Stealth Boy.” She replied. “The commotion was too big to be made by a radroach or a mole rat.”

“It ain’t the odd feral either.”

Nora did one more sweep of the room. This time, she walked close enough that he could smell the tobacco smoke that stuck to her clothing. Apparently, she had started smoking again, even after she worked so hard to quit. He was disappointed.

The acrid smell of cigarette smoke assaulted his nose and he exhaled the breath that he had been holding. He thought he had been discreet, but Nora’s head snapped towards his direction and her green eyes focused on him. She was looking right into his soul.

Nora, his Nora, was frightened. She swallowed and he could see her throat move in response. Her breathing was fast and shallow, like a nervous animal’s, and her hand was trembling despite her stony exterior.

“You see anything?” The man called out. He had moved his search into the office.

“No. I don’t see anything. Whoever it was is probably gone now.” She replied but she sounded
unconvinced. She reached out her hand and he moved his head to the left so she wouldn’t accidentally brush up against him. He had been told the device would make him invisible to the eye, but it wouldn’t make him incorporeal.

He noticed that her ring finger on her left hand was bare. The plain gold band, the one that she never took off no matter how much he pleaded her to out of fear that she’d lose it, was gone. How long had it been? A year? Maybe two? When Father had released her from the Vault, how long did it take for Nora to take off her wedding band? How long did it take her to forget him?

“Sunshine? You okay?” The burned man croaked out. He came up behind her and wrapped his arm around her waist. The terror immediately melted from her face and she turned to him with a tender smile.

“Yeah, I’m good.” She replied. Her smile was the one she’d always give him when he gave her extra pickles with her meal. Or when they walked hand in hand through the Boston Commons as he walked her back to the Suffolk campus. Or when he held her through her moments of depression, when the tears had dried on her face, and the gloom left her eyes.

Then she did something which destroyed him. Nora’s left hand caressed the scarred and blistered skin of the man’s ruined cheek tenderly and brought him in for a kiss. She loved him. He thought. She fucking loved this creature.

“C’mon.” She replied. There was smoke in her voice. The kind of smoke that started fires of passion. “Nick’s waiting for us. I don’t wanna make him worry.”

The man’s thin lips cracked into a wry smirk, “All Nicky does is worry. Ya know that right?”

Nora rolled her eyes. She would often roll her eyes at him like that. That was her ‘you’re-being-insufferable’ expression. “Still, I’ve given him enough things to worry about. Let’s not add one more to the list. Whoever was here is probably long gone by now, and I wanna get back to Sanctuary by tomorrow.”

He watched them both pick their way carefully through the rubble and the collapsed store. Once they were out of sight, he pressed the button on the machine to turn it off and sank against the broken cork board that was against his back.

He pulled out a walkie talkie device and spoke into it. His voice cracked from disuse. “This is Nate. Nora’s on her way to Sanctuary. She has a ... man with her and they are both armed. What are my next instructions?”

“Keep tabs on them. Watch them from afar. Do not engage with her until you can be sure she’s alone.” Father’s voice was dry and hollow. As the doctors put it, he didn’t have much time left before his body would be too weak to fight off the spreading cancer.

“What should I do with her companions? She’s meeting up with another one named Nick.”

“I don’t care. Kill them if they get in the way. They’re not of concern to me. But whatever you do, make sure no harm comes to Nora. She ---” He let out a wet, sickly cough, “She’s too important for my work.”

Nate turned off the walkie talkie and adjusted the military canvas bag that he had tied to his shoulders like a rucksack. He could hear the sound of gunfire off to the west towards Lexington. He was willing to bet they’d skirt around Lexington which meant that they’d be traveling due north once they crossed the river. He wracked his brain of notable landmarks north of Lexington and
figured that the Drive In would be the most logical place to stop before getting to Concord.

It was at least a two hour walk to Concord. He’d trail them to the Drive In and then make his way to Sanctuary on his own. Although it meant more waiting, he knew that soon the wait would be over. It had been 200 years since he last talked to his wife. Waiting a couple more days at most wasn’t going to kill him.

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Nora and Hancock made good time to the Starlight Drive In. After the strange incident at the ransacked convenience store, Nora suggested that they avoid the main roads altogether. Hancock wasn’t exactly thrilled at the idea of traipsing through known radscorpion country, but he wasn’t going to admit that to Nora.

They cut beneath the underpasses and picked their way across the river without encountering a single radscorpion. Bloodbugs, on the other hand, were everywhere.

“Jesus Christ!” Nora complained as she scrubbed at the blood that painted her face. The damn mutated bug exploded like a ripe tomato when Nora shot it in the thorax, and all of the gore and blood from its previous victim rained down on her like a biblical plague.

“Look on the bright side, sunshine.” Hancock grinned and handed her another piece of cloth that he cut from a spare shirt. “Most of these bugs only feast on shit-fer-brains brahmin. So the chances of you accidentally wearing the blood of another human is pretty low.”

Nora shot him a withering expression and snatched the cloth from his hands.

“I never thought I’d say this, but sometimes I miss the Institute. I mean, I miss the fact that I could shower after getting covered in guts and gore.”

“Don’ worry, sunshine. Once we get to Starlight, I’ll help ya clean up.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“How could you think about sex when I’m covered in blood? I feel the absolute opposite of sexy right now.” She grumbled and poured some purified water onto the pink stained cloth scrap.

The river was moving too swiftly for her to get a clear look at her reflection, but she did the best that she could. When she felt sufficiently clean, she pocketed the cloth and holstered her gun.

As she turned, Hancock’s warm hand brushed a smudge of blood from her cheek and then cupped the side of her face in his large calloused hand. “Sunshine, you could be growing another head outta yer neck and I’d still think yer sexy.”

“Flatterer.” She accused with a small smirk.

“Guilty as charged.” He winked and then grabbed her bag from the dusty ground and slung it onto his back with his own pack.

With the sun nearing the apex, the weather had warmed up enough for Nora to forgo her jacket so she tied it around her waist for safekeeping.

Nora and Hancock climbed up the steep embankment that led to the cemetery. Concrete and marble mausoleums dotted the perimeter like frozen soldiers, forever guarding and waiting. Most of the grave markers had been tarnished and weathered by time and a few graves had been dug up by animals, grave robbers, or something even worse.
As they walked through the brown tall grass, Nora heard a heavy sobbing coming from behind a small mausoleum. She drew her gun and ran towards the noise without thinking. She could hear Hancock whisper, “What the fuck are ya doin’ sunshine?” but she ignored him.

“Hello?” She called out.

The figure was hunched so far over that he was partially obscured by the tall grass. At the sound of Nora’s voice, however, he rose to his feet and pointed a pipe pistol shakily at the two of them.

“Ge-ge-get the f-fuck away from me.” He sobbed. The man was dressed in a cobbled together assortment of armor. His face was sallow and pock-marked, and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Hey, hey.” Nora replied calmly and raised her hand up in submission while still aiming her gun slightly away from the man. “We aren’t gonna hurt you. Are you hurt? Do you need help?”

“Ju-just f-fuck off, alright?” He choked and aimed his pipe pistol at Nora’s head. “I — I should shoot you for what happened to Roy.”

“Hey, it’s alright.” Nora replied evenly and took a step away from the man. “We’re gonna go. I’m sorry to interrupt. My condolences about Roy.”

Nora could see that the man had been hunched over the bloody remains of a human. His head had been ripped from his shoulders and part of his spinal column was hanging out of his neck like a macabre Halloween decoration. By the looks of the decay and the bloated discoloration of his face and hands, Roy had been dead for a while.

“I don’t give a fuck about your con-condo” He struggled to pronounce the word and then cocked the trigger on the pistol. “Fuck off!”

“Hey, Hey. Alright brother, we’re fuckin’ off.” Hancock replied. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out two canisters of Jet and tossed them to the man. “Treat yer self to a few hits of Jet. They come straight from Goodneighbor, so you know they’re good. Let’s get outta his hair, Nora.”

They didn’t turn their backs from the man until they were sure they were out of range from his pipe pistol. But when they did finally turn around to make their way to the end of the cemetery, Nora saw the man snatch up the Jet canisters, inhale deeply from one, and then curl up into the fetal position next to his dismembered friend.

Suddenly Nora felt ill and she stopped walking and wrapped her arms around her waist. That man could’ve easily been her. She could’ve given up outside of Vault 111. She could’ve ended it there or just let the wasteland take her, but she didn’t. She chose to go to Sanctuary. She chose to find Shaun, for better or for worse, and she chose to live.

“Sunshine, you okay?”

“Yeah.” She whispered.

She was here. She had survived the Vault, the wasteland, and even the Institute. Nora not only realized these facts, but she acknowledged them. She owned them. Nate didn’t help her survive. She did that on her own. As tragic as it was for her to lose Nate, she wasn’t going to just give up and succumb to death. She was going to fight.

“Sunshine?”

Nora met Hancock’s onyx eyes and smiled. It was the first real smile that he had seen from her. It
was a smile that lit up her face and that eased the wrinkles of anxiety and tension that crinkled around her eyes.

“I’m okay. Truly. And I’m going to be okay. At least, I think I am.” She replied.

He chuckled and then wrapped his arm around Nora’s waist. They walked side by side beneath the iron wrought archway that marked the entrance to the cemetery.

“Yer gonna be better than okay.” He rumbled and kissed her cheek. “Yer gonna be fucking phenomenal one day.”

Nora laughed in disbelief. “I’d settle on just ‘good’ but thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“If you could only see what I see, sunshine.” He replied with a smirk and broke away from her to take the lead.

She exhaled and relished in the warmth of his compliment. Although many things in her life had gone terribly, terribly wrong, Nora realized that she had many things for which to be grateful. This new perspective was rather comforting in a world that was often cruel, nihilistic, and filled with senseless pain and violence.

She looked over her shoulder as they climbed the small hill that led to the nearby railway station. Although she couldn’t make out the shape of the despondent man mourning next to his dead friend, she saw how each gravestone marked the ground like small grey stepping stones. She could’ve been one of those graves if she had chosen to jump from the overpass those long two centuries ago. But she wasn’t.

Nora didn’t put a lot of stock into faith or any one God, but she did whisper a short thanks to the universe for putting people in her life who helped steer her towards the light. For people like Nate, Nick, Dr. Amari, and Hancock. For people who loved and supported her when she couldn’t love herself.
Reunions and Homecomings

Chapter Notes

I was going to wait until we made it to Sanctuary, but I couldn’t. I wrote like four different renditions of their reunion that varied in tone. I think this one is the best of the bunch. Enjoy.

Chapter 12 -- Reunions and Homecomings

The pale sun was approaching the bare tree line by the time Nora and Hancock reached the old storage room behind the cinema screen at the Starlight Drive In. They both surveyed the area for animals or the stray raider. Aside for the handful of mole rats that had infiltrated the abandoned dirt-covered parking lot, the area was clear.

Nora unpacked their things and made up the bed and the couch with sheets and their sleeping bags. During their walk over, Hancock had told her that Nick was going to meet them there and walk with them to Sanctuary. He was expected to arrive before nightfall.

The thought of seeing Nick again made her heart soar, but she still felt awkward about being in such close quarters with both of her lovers. Spending time with one of them separately wasn’t a problem, but being together with them was a bit surreal.

“Hey, I’m gonna climb to the top of the movie screen and keep watch for Nick.” Nora said.

“D’you want any company?”

“No, I’ll be fine.” She replied. She could tell that her response was disappointing to the ghoul, but he respected her decision with a curt nod.

“All right, sunshine. I’ll go find us something to eat that doesn’t come from a can.”

As Nora climbed the wooden stairs, the wind picked up. The cool air nipped at her nose and the staircase’s metal handrails felt numbed her palms as she clambered the rest of the way to the top. Her teeth chattered and her breath came out in a fine frozen mist as she walked her way towards the south end of the movie theater screen.

Although she wasn’t a fan of heights, the view from the top of the cinema screen was outstanding. The bright spotlights from the Corvega assembly plant acted like a beacon by guiding travelers towards the south west, and she could see, albeit veiled behind thick, slate grey clouds, the twinkling ruins of Boston.

To the north, she could see the brick and whitewashed building of the Museum of Freedom. Her fight with the deathclaw there seemed like lifetimes ago, she thought.

She brought the binoculars to her eyes and scanned across the abandoned parking lot before resting briefly on the nearby railroad station. A couple feral ghouls stood next to a train car and two bloatflies sat perched on a nearby tree. There was nothing out of the ordinary and she began scanning back across the parking lot to focus on the fragmented and broken roadbed.
There, approaching from the south, Nora could see the folded brim of Nick’s beaten fedora and the
telltale red glow of a cigarette. She also saw a young, blond-haired man dressed in an old
letterman’s jacket tail the detective like an obedient dog.

Nora zoomed in on the duo and she realized that she knew the blond-haired man. It was Liam
Binet. The elation that rose up from her chest was quickly doused by the sickening deluge of guilt
and realization. The Institute wouldn’t just let him escape, she thought. He was here because of
her.

Just then, an abrupt movement caught her eye and she zoomed in on the concession stand that was
across the parking lot. Through the wrap-around service window, she saw a man’s back and saw
that he was carrying some sort of large laser rifle. She couldn’t get a clear look at his face or his
head as the building was dim and shrouded by the high nearby cliffside. She tried to zoom in
further but the binoculars blurred out of focus. But by the time she refocused them, the figure had
disappeared.

He wasn’t dressed as a raider. In fact, his black leather jacket and his buzz-cut hair made him look
more like an Institute Courser, and she knew that a Courser tailing her could only mean one thing:
he was going to bring her back to the Institute.

She remembered the mishap at Greentech. She remembered the grainy black and white closed
circuit television monitor in Dr. Ayo’s laboratory as it played footage of Nick limping his way to
Goodneighbor. She also remembered one of the picture that Dr. Ayo used to blackmail her with,
how Nick’s slack body was cradled between Hancock and Dr. Amari. How his face was twisted in
pain as sparks emanated from the wound in his gut. Nora couldn’t let the Courser hurt Nick again.
If this Courser was sent to collect her, she’d meet him alone.

She climbed back down the wooden staircase, being cautious to not slip on the slick, sodden wood
and took off running towards the concession stand at a brisk jog. The broken down cars that stood
like old skeletons in the dirt could provide decent cover if this became a firefight. She had to move
fast.

Everything in her body was screaming at her to turn back, to run back to Nick and Hancock, but her
pride and her fear of losing either one of her men pushed her on.

She tried the door handle and found that it was unlocked, so she gently pushed the door open and
peeked into the darkened kitchenette. Aside for her own breathing, she didn’t hear footsteps or
rustling above her. Either the man had already left (which was unlikely) or he was a master at
being stealthy.

“Hello?” She called out.

There was no response but the hair on the back of Nora’s neck prickled. She knew someone was
there; she could feel their presence like one can feel that someone is looking at them when their
back is turned. It was the same feeling she had when she and Hancock investigated the old
convenience store near the BADTFL station near Cambridge. She knew that someone or
something was watching her even if she couldn’t see them. And when they were investigating the
convenience store ruins, she swore that she could hear someone else breathing.

Her voice held fast and she tried to channel all of her adrenaline into an authoritative voice. “I saw
you from the movie screen. I know you’re in here somewhere. If you come out unarmed, no harm
will come to you.”

Again there was no response. Instead Nora heard the delicate, light sound of paper blowing in the
wind and she looked up into the darkness and saw a piece of paper floating through the air. A dark shadow moved away from the metal railing; he was leaving her a message it seemed.

Nora caught the paper and read the news clipping dated November 10th, 2075. It read: SOLDIER HOMECOMING -- The 108th Infantry Regiment will be arriving at the Boston Airport after spending nine months fighting the Chinese Menace in Alaska. Families of soldiers are welcome to attend the welcome home ceremony so generously hosted by the Yellow Ribbon Program and the Family Readiness Group. Remember, families will be asked to provide a photo-ID or a passport as a security precaution; your cars and personal affairs may be searched. Soldiers will be dismissed to go home with their families after the program’s conclusion.

The last time Nora saw this when she was nearing the end of her pregnancy with Shaun. Her family, Nate’s mother, and a handful of distant relatives showed up at the Boston Airport on that sleety November morning excited and nervous. They all made posters and signs welcoming Nate home, but by the time the vertibird touched down, their posters had been reduced to soggy pieces of tagboard.

She’d never forget the look on Nate’s face as he came out of the throng of other soldiers looking for their families; his face lit up when he saw her, his lips were chapped from the cold Alaskan air, and the world disappeared around them as they kissed for the first time in eight months.

“Nate?” She murmured and clutched the message in her fist.

“Nora.” She heard a voice murmur.

Her blood turned to ice when she heard the voice. But denial was the first emotion to strike; she shook her head. This is ridiculous, she thought. But as she went to grab the door handle to leave, she heard the voice again.

“I’m here, Nora.” A voice called out seemingly far away. Although stronger, it sounded like an audible hallucination at first, or like the sound of someone trying to talk during a violent windstorm. But then she heard the voice a third time. It was a voice that sounded so much like Nate’s that Nora stopped moving so she could relish in the memory of her husband’s voice.

“Nora ... Please.”

Now she was certain that the voice was real. She unholstered her pistol quietly but didn’t take it off safety.

“Wh-Who are you?” Nora asked.

“You know who I am.” The voice said again. This time it was directly over the stairwell in the corner of the room.

Of course Nora knew. The voice was unmistakably Nate’s voice. But how could this be possible? Nate was dead.

“I know who you sound like.” Nora replied judicially. “I know who I want you to be, but neither one of those things is ever going to be possible. So why don’t you just come down here and we can sort this out woman to man.”

“Why don’t you come up here?” The voice asked. She could hear the slight challenge that he posed. There was a flirtatious undertone in his challenge.

“What will I find if I come up there?” Nora asked. She took each step slowly and quietly. She took
her time in case it was an ambush, in fact, she assumed that it probably was, so she had a contingency plan forming in her mind just in case.

“You’ll find a man who’s been missing you for a long, long time. You’ll think he’s a ghost, but I can assure you that he’s not.” The voice replied. Against her better judgement, Nora knew that this had to be Nate. Somehow, in someway, she knew she’d find Nate up these stairs.

As she climbed the stairs, the voice became stronger and Nora felt like she was walking through a memory. She stopped just two stairs shy of the landing. The man was shrouded in the darkness, but his silhouette was physically impressive nonetheless. He was tall and broad-shouldered and his clothing only accentuated his physical capacities. He looked more than capable of handling life in the wasteland.

“How is this possible Nathan?” She replied. His name slipped out unconsciously as fear crept into her voice. She wavered on the edge of a pin; her mind was screaming at her to leave, to run back to Hancock and Nick, and forget that this entire thing was happening.

The voice chuckled, deep and gentle. Despite being across the room, he sounded like he was right next to her. “You haven’t called me Nathan in a long time, Nora. At least not since the weekend before Halloween. Do you remember?”

“No.” Nora lied.

“You vetoed my choice for Shaun’s Halloween costume. It was our first real argument in weeks. It was stupid really, us fighting about it, but you were always so passionate when you cared about something.”

“You mean I was being stubborn.” Nora corrected him. When they had their first ever argument as a couple, Nate accused her of being stubborn but Nora replied back that she was passionate for what she believed in. From then on, the euphemism was created much to Nora’s ire.

The voice chuckled, “You were passionately stubborn I suppose. I wanted him to be a cop and you wanted …”

“... A devil.” Nora finished for him in a half-choked sob. She remembered that night clearly. “I wanted Shaun to be dressed as a devil.”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Too bad we never made it to Halloween. He would’ve made the cutest devil.”

Nora said nothing. She couldn’t formulate the words. Now she was thankful for the privacy that the darkness provided; if Nate was somehow there, she was happy he couldn’t see her tears.

“Hon, I know this is hard for you to understand.” He said.

“Maybe you shouldn’t call me ‘hon’” Nora replied. “I don’t even know you. You act like you’re Nate, but that’s impossible. You can’t be Sergeant Nate Pendleton, only son of Mike and Sheila Pendleton of East Boston. You’re just ...”

There was an uneasy pause. Nora knew her words had wounded him, but she couldn’t delude herself into thinking the impossible.

He sighed. It was a sigh of defeat and resignation. “You’re partially right. I’m a synth, Nora. But I’m also Nate. I’m your husband. I couldn’t be anything else.”

“But you’re not ... human. Nate, my Nate, was a flesh and blood human, and I buried him eighteen
months ago.”

“And eighteen months later, he’s been given back to you Just in a different form.” He urged. “I know this is far fetched and I know this may sound completely crazy, but I need you to understand somehow.”

Nora couldn’t. She couldn’t look past the wound that had been reopened. She thought she had managed to move on after Nate’s death. She managed to find love again, not once but twice, and she had a community of people around her. If this synth really thought he was her husband, Nora wasn’t sure if there was room in her life or in her heart for another variable to force its way in.

“So lets say you are my husband.” Nora replied. “What do you want from me?”

There was a pregnant pause and a sharp intake of breath that sounded she had physically attacked him with her words. “I don’t want anything from you Nora. I already got everything I wanted.”

“And what was that?”

“To see you again. At least just once.” He replied. Nora’s heart broke. She couldn’t do this. This could be the most elaborate prank in the world, or it could be some miracle of science or divinity, but Nora couldn’t torture herself any longer.

“I have to go.” Nora replied. “I’m sorry.”

“Wait! Please don’t go.” Nate said.

Nora froze. “Why?”

“I understand that you’re confused and that you’re hurting.” He said. “But can I just talk to you one more time? I know this is a lot to process.”

Nora took a step down the stairs and looked up into his dim silhouette. “I -- I can’t make any promises. I don’t know.”

“Please! Just think on it for a couple of days. I know you’re heading back home to Sanctuary. I’ll be hanging out next to the entrance to the Vault if you change your mind. I can only spare a couple of days though. Shaun needs me back at the Institute. His cancer is spreading and I’ve been taking care of him since I awoke.”

The news hit her like an anvil to the head and her silence told more than any words could ever do.

“Ah shit, you didn’t know did you?” Nate said. “God dammit, I’m sorry. I thought they told you when you were with the Institute. Shit, I --”

“NORA? NORA!” Hancock’s voice echoed across the parking lot.

“I gotta go.” Nora said quickly.

“Nora, wait!” He replied.

He leaned over the metal railing and came into the ray of dim light shining through the side door. From the tips of his hair to the scar that cut across his left eye and lip, Nora looked into her husband’s face for the first time since she buried him.

“I’ve missed you Nora.” He reached out his hand to her. The angle was awkward and Nora had to climb up two steps to take it.
“And I’m sorry.” He said. His hand was dry and warm. The callouses beneath his fingers and
around his palm tickled Nora’s skin.

“What are you sorry for? You haven’t done anything.” Nora asked.

Nate’s blue eyes looked down at her dolefully. “I’m sorry for leaving you. I’m sorry that you had
to face this world alone. I --” He cleared his throat of the burgeoning emotion, “I wasn’t there to
protect you and Shaun like I should’ve.”

Nora swallowed thickly and tears spilled down her cheeks. Damn the compartmentalizing, she
thought.

She took a few ragged breaths and pulled her hand free of his. “You never left me Nate. I couldn’t
have made it this far without you guiding the way.”

He smiled. It was the shy, uncertain smile that she fell in love with, and it pained Nora to tear
herself away from it.

Now Nick joined in and both Hancock and Nick’s voices echoed across the parking lot.

“I’m sorry, I need to go.” Nora replied and she quickly descended the stairs.

“Remember Nora. Vault 111. I’ll be there waiting.” He called after her.

As Nora left the concession stand, she looked behind her shoulder but saw nothing except the
setting sun.

Nora placated the men’s concern for her absence by lying. She told them that she lost track of time
reading the various Boston Bugles that were strewn about in the concession stand.

It was a hard sell, especially to Nick who seemed to have a preternatural instinct to determine when
someone was lying to him, but the newspaper clipping about her husband’s homecoming that she
still had clenched in her fist seemed to placate him enough.

She didn’t feel good about it, but she knew that telling them the truth might do more harm than
good. Even if this synthetic Nate was truly and completely just looking to reconnect, Nora didn’t
completely trust him yet. However, she worried what her men would think about the issue. Hell,
even she didn’t know quite what to make of it yet.

Dinner that night was closer to a small party. Hancock and Nick split a bottle of scavenged whisky
and Nora found some white wine that hadn’t turned to vinegar. Liam declined anything they
offered besides the mole rat meat (which he ate voraciously) and a bottle of Nuka Cola.

Liam and Nora talked most of the night. Nora apologized to Liam for getting him into trouble, but
Liam wouldn’t hear any of it.

“Nora, I would do it all over again in a heartbeat.” He replied. “I knew what I was getting myself
into. How can I call myself a man if I can’t stand up for what I believe in? Besides, I’ve
experienced so many new and different things.”

The two of them swapped stories of their adventures; they talked and laughed like they were old
veterans swapping war stories, and their conversations left Hancock and Nick feeling like the odd
men out.
By the time the moon had risen well above the tree line, Hancock got up from his seat on the overturned Nuka Cola machine and stretched.

“Alright guys, I got first watch tonight. Kid, it’s best to get some sleep; second watch comes pretty quickly.” He said.

Liam’s looked at the ghoul with wide-eyes and nodded. Nora smirked at Liam’s bashful and nervous expression. For never having seen a ghoul, Liam figured the best course of action was just to agree to everything the terrifying man told him, and Nora knew Hancock would abuse the issue once he realized the power his ghoulified appearance had over the young man.

“Here, I’ll help you get set up.” Nora replied and offered her hand to help Liam up from the ground. She grabbed his pack that he was sitting against and did a double take when she felt its weight.

For a kid who left the Institute with nothing but the clothes on his back, he certainly accumulated a lot of junk since being topside. The straps on the pack he carried groaned from the weight and Nora was amazed that the old canvas didn’t split open in the twenty feet it took to carry it inside.

“What have you got in here? Rocks?” Nora complained.

Liam came up behind her and put the pipe pistol that Nick had given him on the ground next to the overly plump and moth-eaten couch.

“I keep finding really neat things that I think my dad would like to have.” Liam replied. He had to displace a couple of intact microscopes, a crystal liquor decanter, and a handful of rolled up Boston Bugles to pull out a blanket that was folded up on the bottom of the bag. “He’s always wanted to go topside with a Courser, but he’s never been granted the clearance. He’d probably use the microscopes for spare parts and the liquor decanter for holidays and other celebrations.

Nora sighed and put a gentle hand on his shoulders. In all likelihood, Liam would probably never see his father again. If collecting a few pieces of junk here and there would help him feel better, then Nora wasn’t going to say anything to dissuade him.

“I’m sure he’ll be thrilled Liam.” She replied with a kind, sad smile.

As she turned to leave, Liam grabbed ahold of her arm and turned her to face him. “Hey. I just wanna say that I’m glad you made it back home. I like him, Mister Valentine that is. He seems like a good person. You deserve it.”

“Thanks Liam.” Nora replied. She gave his arm one final pat and then walked back into the night air.

“Did’ya put the kid to bed?” Nick asked with a wry smile as she sat back down next to him.

“He’s not a kid Nick. He’s seventeen and he’s missing his father.” She rebuked.

“I know that. I was only kidding, doll.” He replied. “He’s a good ally to have, that kid. He’s a real brainiac, and he’s loyal too. I nearly had to pry the information outta him when it came to you. Whatever bond you struck up with him is strong stuff.”

“I owe my life to him, Nick.” She said quietly. “If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Nick nodded as though he confirmed a personal suspicious he had. Then he cleared his throat, the sound abrupt and gruff, so unlike Nick’s normally smooth countenance. His thumb brushed across
her knuckles and his metal hand plucked a cigarette from his coat pocket and let the flames from the campfire light it for him.

“So...I have some news for you, doll. I wanna be straight with you, but I know this is gonna sound crazy.” He spoke in a low voice as though he was afraid Hancock would overhear them.

“What’s up?” She asked. In her gut, she already knew what Nick was going to tell her, the world often worked on coincidence and timing, and if Synth Nate had managed to track her down here, then it would make sense that a detective would’ve noticed a new person skulking around the only two friendly settlements in Boston proper.

“I -- uh. The Railroad’s been receiving intel about the Institute's activities as of late. I only recieved the news yesterday but I know this is a matter they’ve been watching closely for some time. The kid’s been helpful with corroborating the likelihood of this story and although it’s gonna sound far-fetched, I swear that this is real.”

Nora nodded quietly and let Nick continue.

“I’ll believe whatever you tell me Nick. I trust you.” Nora replied.

Nick nodded in satisfaction. He was humbled, sure, but it would make everything easier knowing that Nora would’t be second guessing his story’s authenticity at every turn. “You remember what I told you about my memories, about the real Nick Valentine and how he went in for some Pre-War brain scan and I woke up with all his thoughts and feelings in my head?”

Nora nodded.

“Well, the Institute’s done it again...and apparently they’ve improved on the method this time. And he’s looking for you.”

Nora nodded again. She fixated her face to make it look like she was mesmerized by the flames, but she knew that if she looked Nick in the eye, he’d catch on to her deceit. “Who was he?”

Nick shifted uneasily beside her. “He’s your late husband, Nora.”

The truth. So, her conversation at the concession stand across the way wasn’t just some form of trickery, slight of hand, or temporary insanity. Her husband’s voice, memories, personality, and features had been replicated by the Institute and downloaded into a synth that was the near copy of her husband, and he was sent to find her.

“Has he been sent here to hurt me?” Nora asked.

“We dunno. According to the kid, he was created as a ... reward of sorts. Apparently you and him were suppose to play ‘happy family’ down in the Institute.”

“Has anyone seen him since the sighting in Boston?” It was a leading question and Nora knew it. If her companions assumed they weren't being followed, then Nora might have the opportunity to sneak away and see him again.

“No. And we’ve searched both Diamond City and Goodneighbor. We don’t think he’d be hiding out in a settlement, but it would take us months to work Boston’s ruins over with a fine-toothed comb and that’s time and manpower we don’t have. You haven’t seen anything suspicious while you and Hancock were traveling, have you?”

Another white lie, “No. I mean, we heard something cause a pretty big commotion in an
abandoned convenience store over by Cambridge, but when we checked it out we didn’t find anything. It could’ve been a random dog that we scared off.”

Nick frowned, “Just be careful, doll. Trust your instincts and if you see anything weird, let us know, okay?”

She sighed but didn’t respond. She pulled her knees to her chest. To Nick, her reaction looked like she was on edge or in deep thought, but Nora felt sick to her stomach. She didn’t like lying to Nick. But she needed to sort out what the hell was happening for herself.

“Doll?” Nick turned to her and his synthetic hand left hers to cup the side of her face. She saw the concern in his eyes and the fear. He thought she’d break all over again, and maybe she was close. Maybe she was one more hit away from shattering, but Nora knew that she couldn’t predict if or when that moment would come. She had to find some way to endure.

“I’m okay, Nick.” She replied and rested her cheek against his touch. “Really, I am. Thank you for telling me. I know it wasn’t easy to do so.”

“I gotta say, doll. You’re handling this all remarkably well.” He replied. “This is some pretty heavy news, even without the Institute’s involvement, if I was you, I wouldn’t have believed a word of it.”

“Ever since I escaped the Institute, I’ve learned to be a bit more open-minded about the things that can happen in life.” Nora replied. Her answer was cryptic but it seemed to satisfy Nick’s concern.

Nora leaned her head against Nick’s shoulder. He passed her his lit cigarette and she took a drag from the filter. The smoke mingled with the black campfire smoke and rose up to the cloudy night sky. She knew in her gut that the synth-called-Nate was probably watching them from afar. She thought back to how her husband beamed with pride when she managed to last an entire month without a cigarette. The nicotine patches she bought barely took the edge off but through a combination of sheer willpower, stubbornness, and drug store issued cessation medication, she managed to get ahead of her addiction. She frowned at the memory and then passed Nick’s cigarette back to him. The taste of tobacco and smoke didn’t seem as appealing anymore.

There was a lot of things in her life that had changed, Nora reasoned. If Nate was here now, she knew he’d be disappointed in how she chose to live her life. He told her that he’d be understanding if she moved on in the event of his death, granted the circumstances around his possible death were on the battlefield and not in a frozen tomb created by corporate madmen, but understanding isn’t the same as accepting. Besides, most people make these promises with the expectation that they’d never have to see their former wife kissing his replacement.

That also begged the question of his relationship with their grown son. He had to be allied with them in some way; shit, he was created by the Institute after all. So, it stood to reason that he was oblivious to the Institute’s true sins, or worse, he was complicit in them. It made sense on their part, actually. Nora was the imperfect soldier; she was blackmailed and bribed into compliance, but Nate -- a man who was created, trained, and indoctrinated by the Institute -- would be an invaluable asset.

She also felt the sting of rejectment. Shaun was probably going to be a daddy’s boy anyway. Nora had failed at being a mother when he was an infant, and she failed again when her despair and her temper got the best of her. Shaun was many, many things, but she still regretted her outburst that night. She had been pushed to the brink and she snapped, and her son was hit with the shrapnel. And to top it off, her son’s cancer diagnosis...


“You’re mind’s goin’ a mile a minute, doll.” Nick whispered, interrupting her thoughts. “You sure you’re alright.”

Nora blinked a couple of times and stretched. Fatigue was beginning to set in, and she needed to call it a night, at least so her racing thoughts would finally stop.

“Yeah...” She cleared her throat. “I just got a lot on my mind with ... You know. What you told me. Sorry.”

Nick kissed her forehead and whispered into her hairline, “You got nothing to apologize for, doll.”

“I think I’m gonna turn in.” Nora said. “Maybe a good night’s sleep will help me sort all of this out.”

Nick stood up with her, ever the gentleman, and walked her inside the small storeroom. She kissed him softly on his smooth lips, and he affectionately pinched her chin when they broke apart.

Over the course of that evening, Liam snored softly on the sofa. Hancock came in from his shift a couple hours later and took the sofa from Liam. Nick, who never needed to sleep, did his diagnostic scan before Nora took the early morning watch. When it was her time to wake up, she stood by the treelike with Nick; he was smoking and Nora was wrapped up in her thick bomber jacket and one of the extra blankets.

During her watch, she brooded some more while Nick smoked; two hearts in a pair. She thought about how Nick, against his better judgement, told her the truth about Nate’s appearance. She once scolded him for shutting her out and for withholding important information from him, but wasn’t she doing the same thing? No matter how she justified it, Nora had to come clean to Nick, but a part of her didn’t want to. A part of her wanted to live in the past, in the fantasy of life before Nick and Hancock, the Institute, and the bombs. A time where the only challenges in life were trying to parent a fussy infant, paying the bills, tending to the husband, and living in a world on the brink of nuclear war.

When they crossed the bridge to Sanctuary, Nora was surprised to find that the entire town was fortified. Two large wooden guard towers flanked the entrance to the town, and a rudimentary wooden wall was built up around the town’s perimeter. Two metal machine gun turrets sat idle in front of the guard towers.

“Halt.” A woman called from the guard post. Her hunting rifle was pointed right at Nora. “State your business here, traveler.”

“I’m Nora.” She replied cautiously holding her hands up in surrender. “This is Detective Nick Valentine from Diamond City, Mayor Hancock from Goodneighbor, and Liam from Salem. I use to live here. Is Preston Garvey still here? I helped them out in Concord last year and I wanted to check up on them.”

The woman narrowed her eyes. Her heated stare appraised Nora before she signaled to her compatriot to head back into town. “You all can wait by the bridge.”

The group trudged back to the half-broken wooden bridge and waited until a wide-brimmed wearing cowboy poked his head over the wooden fence.

“Nora? Just a minute. I’ll have them open the doors.” Preston said. He beckoned them towards the gate and yelled to an unseen fellow to open up the hydraulic metal door. A cheery “Welcome to Sanctuary” purple neon sign sat to the right of the door.
“This is a helluva welcome party.” Nick remarked.

Preston came out and extended his hand for Nora and the rest of them to shake.

“Nora, God it’s been a long time. How are you?” He asked brightly.

“I’m fine Preston.” She replied. She was surprised by how happy she was to see the man. Although she wouldn’t call him a friend, she still wished him no ill will and hoped that he didn’t harbor any resentment towards her for spurning his offer to lead the Minutemen. By the looks of the grin that was plastered to his face, it seems that was all water under the bridge.

He looked unchanged. The dancing, red energy from his modified musket casted a warm glow near his face. His clothes were a little more worn and weather beaten, but he looked healthy and strong.

“So what brings you to our neck of the woods?” He asked brightly.

“I -- I was hoping to stay here for a couple of days. You know, to rest and recoup. I just felt the need to come home. If you have the room for all of us that is.”

“Of course!” Preston said. “The group will be happy to see you. And we have a few new people too, thanks to you.”

The group grabbed their bags and followed Preston across the bridge and past the wooden guard posts. The two guards were dressed in thick leather armor, and both women sported heavy duty hunting rifles.

“Where did you find your guard dogs?” Hancock rasped. “These don’t look like the raider sort.”

“Uh, well that’s because they’re not.” Preston replied. He was caught off guard by the ghoul’s assessment. “These two use to be caravan guards but when their caravan rolled out, these two decided to stay. We weren't in much of a position to turn them away; raiders are starting to hear about our setup here and attacks have been happening with more and more frequency. Since they started working here, the attacks have gone down substantially.

When they passed through the metal door, Nora almost gasped when she saw the sight of her former homestead.

The houses that once stood in Sanctuary were now remodeled and augmented with steel walls and shingled roofs. Nora noticed that some of the houses were re-painted while others were completely re-constructed with pieces of the other collapsed houses. On one of the old foundations, there was a large meeting area with a few steel lawn chairs circled around a burning fire pit. The broken cars, debris, and destroyed lamp posts were gone. The town had a rudimentary set of floodlights installed on each of the houses and they were powered by a large generator that was tucked up against a vacant garage.

Seeing Nora’s awed reaction, Preston spoke, “I hope you don’t mind that we’ve remodeled a bit. Sturgis discovered that many of these houses had intact wiring and he was able to built this generator and hook up some more amenities to make life a little easier. We even have a working washing machine.”

Nora heard the pride in his voice and the pride was well deserved. “Preston, this is amazing. I’m speechless.”

He blushed at her compliment and led her down the street. The term ‘settlement’ wasn’t accurate
enough to describe how the community had grown. In fact, Nora figured that Sanctuary Hills could expand to something that rivaled Diamond City in a few years.

Preston led the group to the robin’s egg blue house on the left. The orange wooden door to her house was closed and her house was the only one that wasn’t remodeled or refurbished in any meaningful way.

“Your house was going to be the one of the last ones we changed.” Preston replied when he saw her pained face. “The house has electricity again but we gutted out the living room for furniture and scrap, but everything else remains untouched. If you wanted to stay there, we could probably scrounge up some bedrolls and sleeping bags for you and your companions.”

“No that’s okay.” Nora replied. “We brought our own gear. Thanks.”

“Alright,” He replied. “Oh and by the way, you have someone who would be thrilled to see you again. Hey Codsworth!”

The Mister Handy floated past a window and opened the front door, “Yes, Mr. Garvey. How may I be -- AS I LIVE AND BREATHE! MUM! Is that really you?”

Codsworth’s eye stalks wagged and trembled in excitement and he hovered out into the street.

“Hey Codsworth.” She beamed.

She embraced the robot and gently felt the dent and the scrape that was located below his right eye stalk. “Oh Codsworth, I’ve missed you.”

“Oh, the same to you mum.” He replied. “So were you successful? Did you find Shaun?”

Nora sighed, “Let’s talk about that later, Codsworth. I have some friends who I want you to meet.”

“Of course, mum.”

Preston motioned for her to walk with him towards the house’s entryway as the three men introduced themselves to Codsworth. He led her into her old living room and flicked a light switch near the doorway. Small tea lights and dim electric candles were fixed to the ceiling and walls. The room was a wash with a romantic glow which painted the interior with gold.

“Go take a look at the rest of the place.” He replied. “Codsworth was a huge help with cleaning everything and Sturges added a few little touches there and there. You have hot, running water in the bathroom, thanks to him.”

Nora felt rooted to the spot. She didn’t dare venture farther than the living room; she couldn’t, at least not with the memories of her old life haunting the hallways. Masking her pain, she gave Preston an easy-going smile, “I’ll explore in a bit once we’re all settled in. Thanks.”

Preston nodded, hearing the dismissal in her voice, and tipped his hat to her. “If you need anything, Nora. You just let me know, okay?”

As Preston left, Nick, Hancock, Liam, and Codsworth filed in to the house.

“Wow, Nora. You use to live here?” Liam asked.

“Um, yeah.” She replied awkwardly. “You all can set your stuff down anywhere. There are two bedrooms down the hallway and the bathroom is the first room on the left.
“Mum, shall I whip you all up some tea?” Codsworth asked.

“You know you don’t work for me anymore Codsworth.” Nora replied. “I released you, remember?”

“Oh yes, but it’s in my programe mum. I live to serve! And I choose to serve you.” He said.

“Tea would be swell Codsworth, thank you.” Nick replied politely.

“Right-oh!” Codsworth floated off towards the kitchen and began purifying water to put in a tarnished kettle.

“Nora, I’m gonna go look around some more!” Liam replied. “This place is amazing!”

Hancock looked sideways at Liam. He could feel Nora’s tension, the anxiety in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife, and he noticed that Nick saw it too.

“I’ll go after the kid and make sure he doesn’t get into too much trouble.” He rumbled.

“Thanks,” She replied.

Nora turned towards the hallway and took a few steadying breaths. Sweat beaded at the base of her neck and her hands felt clammy and cold.

“C’mon doll.” Nick murmured, slipping his hand into hers. “Let’s go face those demons of yours.”

Nora led the way down the hall and pulled the chord to turn on the bathroom light. The mirror was cracked beyond use, and the toilet had been dislodged from the linoleum, but the shower and the sink looked to be in good condition. The fluffy white towels that she and Nate had received as a wedding present were moth eaten and moldy. But otherwise the bathroom was clean and operable. She walked farther down the hallway and took the second left and went into her bedroom. Looters must’ve taken the mattress a long time ago and the window was boarded up with plywood, but otherwise the place looked as she had left it.

She opened the dresser to her left and found her skirts, blouses, and stockings all folded up into neat little piles. The next drawer was full of Nate’s t-shirts and button down shirts, khaki pants for casual wear and black slacks for more professional occasions. As she crossed the room, she saw the black burn in the carpet next to the bed and the first rush of memories flooded back to her.

She took a seat on the wooden bed frame and touched the rough patch of carpet gently, like one would caress fine glass.

“This burn was from me. I tried to light a match so I could smoke, but I was trembling too hard and all the matches caught fire. I dropped them here.” She told Nick.

“Go on, doll.” Nick replied and took a seat next to her. “Talk about it if it’ll help.”

Nora’s voice was hollow and her fingers never left the piece of burned carpet. “I was so stressed and tired after Shaun’s birth. I couldn’t find a job that would hire a college drop out just a semester shy of graduation. I was over qualified for secretarial work and I was under-qualified for anything else. Nate was trying to find a job at one of the military bases, a cushy desk job away from the action on the field, but people wanted Nate the war hero, not Nate the new father. He almost considered signing up for another tour in Anchorage just because it was good money, but I begged him not to.”
Nick wanted to kiss Nora’s hand but felt it was sacrilegious to kiss a widowed woman in the bedroom that she and her husband once shared, so he gently brushed the strands of choppy, chin length hair behind her ear and caressed her face with his hand.

She gave him a small smile that was like a small candle in the darkness and she continued, “So. I was taking care of Shaun and I just couldn’t take it anymore. He was screaming, completely red-in-the-face kinds of yelling, and nothing I did would quiet him down.

“That must’ve been hard, doll. What with a new kid and all the things you were balancing. It would make anyone go a little crazy.” Nick empathized.

“I know. But I didn’t handle it well, Nick. I -- I just kind of broke down. I locked myself in this room. I wouldn’t open the door for anyone, and I smoked so much that my throat was raw by the time Nate kicked the door open. I can still hear Shaun’s screams and I just let him cry.”

Nick pulled Nora into his side. “You’re no different than the billions of other mothers with kids who drive them crazy. A crying baby isn’t somethin’ to beat yourself up about.”

Nora rested her head in her palms and shook her head.

“Nora, in my line of work I’ve seen mothers do all manners of terrible things to their children. Some sell them off so they can pay for chems and others just leave them out for the wastes to claim because they’re another mouth to feed. You can’t keep livin’ your life thinking you’re the worst thing to walk the earth just because you couldn’t get an infant to stop crying.”

“He’s right you know, mum.” Codsworth replied. He was carrying a tray with two chipped mugs full of herbal tea. “You’re being much too hard on yourself.”

Nora took the warm mugs from the tray and passed one to Nick. The tea had a mild taste, but the warmth it brought was more than appreciated.

“Codsworth, you were there.” Nora pointed out. “You were terrified.”

“I wasn’t terrified, mum.” Codsworth replied with a slight tone of indignation, “I was concerned for you. Shaun was throwing what you humans call a tantrum. Everything in my programming told me that it would eventually pass. He was fed, his nappy was changed, and he was safe. But you, mum, I was worried about you.”

“I appreciate that Codsworth.” Nora replied, “But there will always be some part of me that feels responsible for what’s happened.”

Then Nora looked at the robot in the eyes. “Codsworth, I found Shaun.”

He knew by Nora’s tone that the resolution wasn’t a pleasant one. “Did -- did he perish, mum?”

“No. It’s hard to explain, but he was kidnapped far earlier than I thought. He’s an old man now and ... he’s dying.”

Nick frowned at the news. So Nora did know about her son’s illness, he thought.

“Oh mum...” Codsworth replied quietly.

The sobs shook her body and tea splashed onto her trembling hands. “And maybe if I was a better mom, Shaun wouldn’t be the type of man he is now. And maybe --”
Nick took the mug from Nora’s hand and set it on the floor next to his. He took out a handkerchief from his pocket, gave it to Nora who wiped her eyes with it, and pulled her into a tight embrace.

Nora sobbed into Nick’s chest. She clung on to him for dear life and let the floodgates of her compartmentalized emotions crash into her head-on. She was so good at repressing her emotions and the emotional pain that pulled at her chest felt like someone was crushing her heart with an iron grip. But as much as it hurt, she needed to feel it.

When Nora’s crying died down into weak shudders and hiccups, Nick guided her back into the living room. The darkened bedroom that once was Shaun’s bedroom would have to be explored another day.

When they came back into the living room, Hancock was lounging up against the countertop smoking a cigarette, but when he saw Nora he pulled her into a hug of his own.

He looked at Nick questioningly who just shook his head. Now wasn’t the time nor the place and Hancock understood. Nora broke apart from the ghoul and coughed weakly. A dull headache was forming between her eyes.

“Mum, forgive me if this is too bold.” Codsworth began. “Now may not be the best time for this, but it’s something that’s been on my mind for a while.”

Nora looked at the robot quizzically. The way Codsworth was talking made it seem like he had developed some semblance of independent thought.

“Go ahead Codsworth.” Nora replied.

“Thank you, mum.” He said. “I’ve always had such admiration for you and your family, ever since the day my visual sensors were first switched on. I know that Master Nate assembled me and programmed me but you Nora, you treated me as your ... equal. I respected you and I saw how hard you fought with your pain. You tried to hide it from Master Nate, but I noticed it. So you can imagine the distress I felt when the bombs fell, after you fled to the Vault. I searched this entire town and the forests around it, but found no evidence of your death. I could only hope that you made it somehow. And when you returned, I was overjoyed! I admit I ran a full diagnostic scan just to make sure I wasn’t malfunctioning. And traveling with you to Diamond City, and nearly losing you again, well ...”

“I know Codsworth, I should’ve never dragged you with me. I should’ve let you stay here with Preston.” Nora replied.

“No mum, please.” Codsworth begged. “I’m coming to the point I’m trying to make. Just bear with me. When you released me that day after Mister Arturo fixed me up, I saw how guilty you felt. I saw your pain, but I also saw your respect for me. Mum. You would do anything to help someone you care for, even if it meant hurting yourself. You’re a hero to many here.”

Nora had never heard Codsworth talk that much. “I’m no hero, Codsworth. Trust me.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, mum. In such a bleak world as this, think of all you’ve witnessed and all you’ve done. In my two hundred years, I’ve seen it tear good men and women apart. But you, mum. You have remained the very model of what humanity should aspire to be. I truly believe that you are the one person who can help turn the Commonwealth around.”

“If you think the world aspires to be a woman who failed at every thing she tried to do, then you have a pretty bleak idea of humanity.” Nora grumbled.
“You didn’t fail, Mum.” Codsworth insisted. “You survived. You survived the bombs, you survived the wasteland, and … “ Codsworth paused, unsure if he should continue, “You survived the darkest demons inside of you. I should think that is plenty worthy of praise. Now, I’ve said my peace. If there’s nothing more that you require, I will see if Mister Garvey needs my assistance.”

If Codsworth could breathe, Nora was sure he’d be panting from his tirade.

“We’re all good here, thanks Codsworth.” Nick replied with a grin.

Codsworth shuddered and made a motion that could only be described as a half bow and floated out into the afternoon sunlight.

“He’s quite the chatterbox.” Hancock remarked.

Nora laughed at the absurdity of it all. Here she was, tear-stained and blotchy-faced, standing in her living room with her two boyfriends and receiving a rousing, inspirational pep talk from Codsworth.

“He may be the best thing about this place.” Nora replied.

“He’s right you know.” Nick stated. His face held a satisfied look that bordered on saying ‘I told you so.’

Hancock nodded. You say you ain’t a hero, but that’s the first thing I thought of when you walked into my town. You care about people who don’t deserve it.”

“And you go above and beyond to help those who do.” Nick replied and gestured out towards the living room window. “Preston told me what you did. You charged in, saved their group from raiders, and fought a deathclaw?! I’m slightly burned up that I had to hear that story from him, doll.”

“But--” Nora countered.

“No butts, sunshine.” Hancock interrupted. “You don’t have to believe us, but you don’t get to get to argue either. Just accept that you’re pretty fuckin’ amazing and move on.”

Nora rolled her eyes and walked out into the sunshine. Nick took her right hand while Hancock took hold of her left.

“If you guys aren’t careful, I’m gonna get a bloated ego from all this praise.” Nora warned.

“I’m sure Nicky and I will find a way to bring ya back down to Earth.” Hancock smirked.

Nora looked at Nick and saw the heat and desire that simmered in his eyes, and although the afternoon was chilly and bracing, Nora the cold couldn’t penetrate the layer of embarrassment and lust that flushed through her skin.

“You both are terrible influences when you’re together.” Nora remarked.

Both men grinned but said nothing. As the trio walked down the crumbling asphalt road towards the center of the cal-du-sac, Nora felt a sense of belonging and acceptance that she had never felt before. It was a profound acceptance that she didn’t get in Goodneighbor or even in Diamond City. Diamond City and Goodneighbor were nice enough places to live, but Nora knew that Sanctuary Hills would always be her home.
Chapter 13 -- I Hurt You Because I Care

“Hand me that garden trowel.” Marcy barked at Nora.

Nora retrieved the tool from the rusted metal table that held an assortment of gear: wrenches, spades, wonderglue, and she handed it to the woman.

Marcy groaned as she knelt down on the hard packed dirt. Her pregnant belly strained beneath her road leathers and thin long johns. Although they had started their work a couple of hours ago, she was still moving at a steady and strong pace. Nora made the mistake to offer to do all the work, but Marcy spurned her offer. She said, “Just because I’m pregnant doesn’t mean I’m gonna sit around all day like the Queen of Sheebah. Now grab those tato seeds and those stakes.”

Nora complied and then knelt down in the dirt with Marcy. Together the women dug a two inch hole and deposited four white seeds into the ground and then stuck three stakes in a triangle formation to act as a trellis for the vines that would grow that coming spring.

The women had spent the better part of the afternoon planting tatos along the back side of Mrs. Parker’s house. Nora sat back on her haunches and wiped the sweat that beaded on her forehead.

With the influx of new settlers, Preston decided that the town needed to increase its crop yield to accommodate all of the extra hungry mouths. So when Nora asked him if he needed any help around the town, Preston nearly jumped at the opportunity to utilize an extra set of hands.

Nora’s other traveling companions weren't spared from the conscripted manual labor either. Hancock was put to work at the chemistry station resupplying the town with stimpacks, Med-X, and other smaller medicinal items. Nick and Sturges worked together on the town’s main generator as Nick’s previous experience as Diamond City’s handyman and plumber came in useful, and Liam and Jun repaired some of the damage done to a watchtower on the town’s southern gate. Liam wasn’t much of a fighter, but he could wield a hammer with the best of them and he took direction well.

“We’ll never get these finished if you keep starin’ off into space.” Marcy snapped.

Nora sighed and grabbed another set of seeds and stakes and plopped down in the cold dirt next to her. Marcy was never a pleasant woman to be around, but now that she was nearly full term with her pregnancy, her temper was hot and her already limited patience was short.

“So, what are you gonna name the baby once its born?” Nora asked politely.

“Why, what’s it to you? We’re not friends.” She snapped back.

“I’m just making conversation, Marcy.” Nora huffed.

Marcy stopped chipping away at the cold ground and sighed. “Sorry. I know you’re being sincere. It’s just ... I’ve never been good with people. Even when we had our little store in Quincy, Jun did most of the bartering with traders.”

Nora bit her tongue to repress a smart aleck comment and listened politely. Marcy’s dark eyes were framed with wrinkles and her tight lips quivered slightly before steadying into their typical firm resolution.
“It’s been two years since Kyle died, but sometimes I think it happened just yesterday.” She continued and resumed digging. “So when Jun and I found out that I was pregnant, we wondered if it was too soon. We didn’t exactly plan this, it just ... happened.”

Nora counted out four tato seeds and placed them in the hole that Marcy just dug. She figured respectful silence was the safest option with a woman as temperamental as Marcy.

“Truth is...” Marcy continued, “I don’t have a name picked out yet. I’m afraid that if I name it, then I’ll grow attached to it and if the baby dies somehow, then maybe not having a name will be easier for me to move on.”

“Marcy, the baby has to have a name.” Nora reasoned. She stuck three more sticks around the buried seeds and brushed her hands off on her pants. “You’re not in Quincy anymore, and you don’t have to fight tooth and nail to survive. You’ve worked hard to make this little homestead into a home, into a home for your future child to grow up in.”

Marcy’s dark eyes studied Nora carefully and then she sighed, “I always liked the name Rhett. It sounds like a strong name. Jun said he saw the name in some old movie magazines. Oh well, I suppose I still got time to think about it.”

Nora tried to stifle a smirk as she imagined a teenager telling off their mother in a stereotypical Rhett Butler voice: Frankly mother, I don’t give a damn. She wasn't in a position to comment on the name, so she decided to stay quiet.

Nora groaned when she got up from the ground and then offered a dirty hand to Marcy. The woman looked at it pointedly and heaved herself up off the ground without Nora’s help.

“I’m pregnant, not handicapped.” Marcy replied in a tone that told Nora not to think their discussion was the beginnings of a friendship.

“Right.” Nora replied lamely and went to put the tools away. She desperately wanted a shower and she needed to change out of the dirt-stained coveralls that Sturges had found for her.

“I wish you, Jun, and your future baby all the best Marcy.” Nora replied. “Really, I do.”

Marcy grunted in affirmation. It was as close to a thanks as Nora was gonna get.

Nora walked back towards the crumbling asphalt road with her black all in knots and her knees bruised and sore. If she went back to her house now, she’d get first dibs at taking a shower but she felt an unseen force tug her towards the large oak tree that stood bare and stark against the slate grey sky.

Ever since she arrived there, Nora avoided looking towards the gravestone that marked her husband’s final resting place. She assumed that if she ignored it, then she could lock away those memories and never have to deal with them. Unfortunately, Nora knew that repressing her memories rarely worked out for the best.

Her work boots kicked pebbles and asphalt pieces along the road bed with such force that they skittered along the pavement like stones skipping on water. Her hands were tucked into her pockets, but her fists were clenched inside.

The stone they pulled from her neighbor’s dead garden had aged from the weather and a chunk of glowing moss grew in the upper right portion of the rock, but the inscription Nathan: Beloved Husband and Father was unmistakeable and clear.
Nora placed her hand on the cool earth and sat crosslegged in front of the grave marker. Someone had planted bushes of hub flowers on either side of the grave; although they weren't in bloom in the winter, Nora felt touched by the gesture.

She didn’t know what to say to her husband’s grave. She knew that some people held full on conversations like they were talking to their loved one in person, but Nora was never had that much faith. So she resigned herself quiet contemplation. She sat cross-legged in front of Nate’s grave for a handful of minutes with her eyes closed.

Her reverie was broken by the sound of gravel and dirt crunching heavily beneath someone’s foot. She opened her eyes and looked behind her; she expected to see either Hancock or Nick, but the man that stood there was a complete stranger.

“Sorry to interrupt.” He said quietly. The man’s voice was deep and strong and sounded comically out of place coming from a face that was sallow, scarred, and pale.

Nora rose to her feet and turned to face the man. “I was just paying my respects.”

The man nodded. He seemed familiar, but Nora couldn’t place him. His dark hair was unkempt and dirty and one of his eyes was obscured by a clean white bandage. His clothes were two sizes too large for him, and his pants were rolled up several times to allow him room to walk uninhibited. His bare arms were pale but muscular; but for a man with such physical strength to boast, it seemed odd that he wasn’t tan or showing other signs of living a physically intensive life.

“Sorry, do I know you?” Nora asked.

The man looked sheepish. “I’m afraid you do. And I owe my life to you for that. Unfortunately, last time we met, I was in a different state than what you see now. Just another thing that I owe to you, actually.”

Nora looked closer at the man but she still couldn’t place him. “I’m sorry, I don’t recognize you.”

The man smirked. “I’m sure I’d be much more recognizable if I were back in that God-forsaken cave and I was an 8 foot tall green beast drawing blueprints for you with crayon.”


Her eyes widened as the vague memories of that night came flooding back to her. After she shot him twice with Dr. Li’s syringer rifle loaded with his own serum, Nora had no other choice but to defend herself. She shot Virgil in the eye with her laser rifle. It was one of the last coherent thoughts she had before she had passed out.

Virgil’s smile was pained. “If it wasn’t for the Institute’s obsession with laser weaponry, you would’ve most certainly completed your mission. Your laser cauterized the wound and my serum temporarily sped up my healing capabilities as I reverted back to my human form. When I woke up, I discovered that my cave was in shambles and that I was gravely injured, but I was alive. You, however, were gravely injured too, were you not?”

Nora couldn’t do anything but nod. In fact, she thought she would’ve been permanently handicapped from her injuries. With a fractured vertebra, a dislocated shoulder, and a severe concussion, Nora was at the mercy of a lot of uncontrollable forces, including Father, to not make her permanently reliant on the Institute’s advanced medical capabilities to do basic human functions.
Nora ran her dirty hands through her hair. She couldn’t believe it. The guilt of Virgil’s needless death weighed on her mind ever since she left the Institute.

“I thought I killed you!” She repeated. “And everyone at the Institute thinks that I’ve killed you, even Dr. Li.”

“Yes.” Dr. Virgil replied carefully. “Everyone at the Institute thinks that I’m dead which is the only reason why I could travel here without the entire Courser unit hot on my heels, and I hope it stays that way. As for Dr. Li, I managed to get word out to her that I was alive. I wasn’t in a position to wait for her response, but I know she needed that closure.”

Nora shook her head as though she could jostle her brain hard enough so that it could comprehend how Dr. Virgil was not only alive but was also standing in the middle of Sanctuary Hills dressed as a homeless man.

“Did you walk out of The Glowing Sea and come all the way here?” Nora asked.

He nodded, “I was able to patch myself up enough to stop most of the life threatening injuries, and the remnants of the FEV in my system meant that I could withstand the radiation like any other Super Mutant. I only started to feel ill once I made it to the outskirts of the sea’s territory.”

“But what about Raiders, Super Mutants, and other wasteland dangers?”

“I got extremely lucky on that account. I didn’t encounter too much danger aside for the odd feral dog or mutated bug. It didn't get hairy until I cut too close to a pile of cars that were built up like some monument. There was a Super Mutant encampment there, but I guess I still smell like a Super Mutant to them, so I hid in the bushes until they called off their search.”

“And how are you doing now?” Nora asked. Truthfully, he looked like he still had one foot in the grave, but Nora didn’t mention that.

“I’m okay considering the alternative.” he replied. “The lack of medical supplies and clean, sterile equipment is the biggest challenge. There’s more than enough drugs out here for pain management, but now that the FEV seems to be fully out of my system, I’ve began to heal much slower.”

“There’s a doctor in Diamond City and another one in Goodneighbor who could give you the medical attention you need.” Nora replied.

“I know. You’re not the first one to suggest Diamond City.” Virgil replied. “But I’m in no shape to travel by myself, and I don’t know the land here as well as you wastelanders.”

Nora was about to respond but stopped when she saw Hancock walk towards them. His white dress shirt was rolled up to his elbows and his black dress slacks gave him a fifties greaser vibe that Nora appreciated, but his eyes looked all wrong. His eyes flitted around the area nervously and his hands seemed to be trembling.

“You alright there sunshine?” He asked. His voice was no louder than a growl.

Virgil turned to the ghoul and Nora saw a look of apprehension cross his face. Nora remembered how their conversation took a serious turn for the worst when Hancock discovered that one of his brother’s possible fates was that he was a victim in Virgil’s FEV studies and was either killed in the Institute or was set loose on the Commonwealth as a Super Mutant.

“Yeah I’m alright, John.” Nora replied soothingly. “I was just reconnecting with an old
Hancock inhaled sharply, almost as if he was smelling the air near Virgil, and then his eyes narrowed on Virgil’s face. Nora knew that Hancock recognized him immediately. She wasn’t sure how, but the pure bloodlust that had crossed over his face was unsettling.

“Where did you say you were from, pal?” His voice was low and threatening.

“I didn’t.” Virgil replied back coolly. “But we’re both gentlemen here, so I’ll take your threat as a question. I’m from Vault 81.”

“Really.” Hancock replied, his voice was silky. “Vault 81 you say? Can’t say I’ve ever been there. They don’t let us ghouls in, ya feel me? Think we’re gonna go feral at the drop of a hat. What did you do there, pal?”

Virgil took a step back from Hancock. Despite Virgil’s height advantage, Hancock held an intimidating presence.

“I was their doctor.” He replied.

“Uh huh. So a doctor such as yourself leaves the safety of the Vault for God-knows-what and gets himself into a little trouble. What happened? Deathclaw? Raiders?” He paused. “Super Mutants?”

“It was actually a Courser.” Virgil replied and Nora winced. His lie was through and Nora knew it.

Hancock looked at Nora for the briefest of seconds before she saw something glimmer from his boot. The ghoul struck at Virgil grabbing him by his shirt and pushing him up against the large oak tree.

“Hancock, stop!” Nora yelled.

“See, I believe you when you say a Courser did this to you.” Hancock seethed. Fury burned in his dark eyes. “But I don’t believe anything else in your story Dr. Virgil.”

Virgil whimpered in pain as Hancock’s leg pressed into a healing wound on his thigh. “I didn’t blow yer brains out back in that cave out for what you did to my brother because you needed to help Nora find her son. But now, I don’t have to be as patient.”

Hancock pressed his knife against Virgil’s throat and the man squealed like a little girl.

“Hancock, stop!” Nora yelled and tried to pull him off of Virgil. “Are you crazy?”

“Nora, stay outta this. This is a debt that I’ve waited too long to settle.” He seethed.

Nora had to think quickly. She saw the bloodlust in Hancock’s eyes; it was matched only by the fear in Virgil’s eyes. She thought back to her training as a Courser. Even though much of her training time was spent with marksmen training and tactical combat maneuvers, she did ask X6 to teach her a little hand-to-hand combat. It wasn’t much, in fact it mostly boiled down to teaching Nora how to tackle someone to the ground, but she figured now was a good time to put it into practice.

She crouched down like an animal ready to pounce and rushed Hancock. She caught the ghoul in the hip with her shoulders but lost her balance from the added weight and tumbled to the ground with him.
He was dazed and was caught off guard which gave Nora just enough time to kick his knife away with her boot. She knew he carried a switch blade in his pants pocket, so she grabbed it and threw it into the dead grass.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Nora hissed.

Hancock blinked a couple times in shock but then bucked his hips to try and upend Nora but she braced herself and moved with him.

“Get off of me.” He growled. There was no lust or innuendo in his voice, just pure rage and anger.

“No.” Nora spat. “I don’t care what personal vendetta you have against him. You will not murder another man in my fucking town. You got that?”

His eyes narrowed defiantly and he jolted up his hips once more to knock Nora off of him. This time she became unseated and fell forward onto his chest. He pitched her body to the left and she went sprawling into the dirt. Hancock wasted no time to grab his knife and advanced towards the scared and injured doctor.

“Are you kidding me!” She seethed. A rock had scraped her cheek, a minor wound really but it was enough to ignite a fire within her, and she wiped the blood from her face with the back of her hand.

She rushed at Hancock a second time, but instead of tackling him, she pushed him like a bully would push a nerdy kid on the school playground. The ghoul staggered a bit and when he turned to Nora, but all he saw was her fist coming straight for his face.

Nora’s hand connected with the ghoul’s face and she heard a painful crack in her knuckles. Hancock’s head reeled back and blood flowed from a cut above his eye. It seemed like the punch to the face was enough to literally knock some sense back into the ghoul.

He blinked twice and then winced at the pain and tried to staunch the bleeding with his palm. He saw Nora panting and holding her rapidly swelling hand and saw Virgil’s frightened face, pale as death, standing beneath the oak tree.

The anger that consumed him fizzed as quickly as it started. “Shit, sunshine, I--”

“Save it.” Nora spat. “While Virgil is in this town, you will not touch him. You won’t even look at him. Do you understand?”

He sighed and looked positively miserable. “Sunshine, I-I’m sorry. I can explain --”

“I don’t want to hear it right now.” She seethed.

Nora turned to Virgil and gently placed a hand on his back. “C’mon, let’s go talk with Preston and see if he has any extra medicine to spare.”

Dinner that night was a quiet affair. Sturges had bandaged up her hand and she injected some Med-X around her knuckles to deal with the swelling and the pain. Unfortunately, stimpacks only mended wounds and didn’t fix broken bones, so she’d be reliant on Med-X until her hand healed.

Nick was furious at Hancock when he heard the news about the fight, but he was also proud of Nora’s tenacity. According to Sturges, his girl had a helluva right hook.
never understood how inconvenient a broken hand was until she was forced to do everyday tasks left-handed.

She sighed. She was both physically and mentally exhausted after today’s events. “Just make sure he doesn’t try any other stupid shit, okay? I don’t want him to spiral more than he has already. And maybe try to find out what the fuck set him off. I know he had a reason to attack Virgil, after all, he is a prime suspect in his brother’s disappearance, but he’s usually more level headed than that.”

“He’d probably tell you all this to your face, doll. We could even give him the ol’ good cop, bad cop routine.” Nick grinned but the twinkle in his eye told her that he’d enjoy arresting Hancock.

Nora chuckled. “Maybe tomorrow when I’m more level-headed. If I see him again, I may end up punching him some more, and I can’t end up with another broken hand.”

“Mum, do you require anything further?” Codsworth asked. Even though Nora insisted to the robot that he wasn’t expected to clean up around the house, he still floated through the house like a phantom and discreetly tidied up behind them anyway.

“No thanks, Codsworth. You can go.” She said absent-mindedly. Nick put the towel back on the towel rack as Nora ran a comb through her hair.

“Alright mum. Goodnight.” He replied and closed the front door behind him.

“You gonna be okay here by yourself?” Nick asked. “I can stick around if ya want me to.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll probably just turn in early. I’m sore and I think some sleep will help me simmer down a bit.”

“Alright doll.” He replied and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Good night then.”

Nick turned to leave but Nora’s left hand shot out and grabbed him by his lapel and pulled him in for a searing kiss. His tongue gently brushed along her lower lip and she smiled in response. She didn’t mean for their kiss goodbye to devolve into something base and carnal, but Nora needed him.

He reluctantly pulled away and rested his forehead against hers. “I don’t have to leave, ya know.”

She smiled sadly. She wanted nothing more than to take Nick somewhere secluded and continue their passionate entanglement, but doing that on her living room floor amid their assorted gear and bedding where anyone could walk in wasn’t ideal.

“I should probably just go to bed.” She replied softly.

“Then I better go before I, too, make a complete ass outta myself.” He responded.

“I love you.” She whispered when they broke apart.

“Love you, doll.” He whispered. His luminous eyes glowed beneath his fedora and he looked like the stereotypical noir detective as he tugged up the lapels on his trench coat to shield his face from the evening chill as he walked out of her house.

The house was too quiet to be comfortable and each creak of the dilapidated walls and the howling from the wind outside made the house groan like a horror movie monster. The dark hallway that led to the two bedrooms was like an vast cavern, a black hole, that pulled Nora towards it unconsciously.
She couldn’t go in there, she thought. She couldn’t go back into the hallway alone. It wasn’t that she was afraid, she reasoned. It was that she wasn’t strong enough to do this without someone to help her if she lost herself in the pain.

Another thought weighed heavily on her mind and that was about what the Synth Nate said to her back at the Starlight Drive In. He told her that he wanted to talk more. He wanted to reconnect, and Nora would be lying to herself to say that she didn’t want the same thing. But the danger it involved was risky. She knew that this synth version of her husband was somehow aligned to the Institute; he had a motive in mind, even if he hid it from Nora. She assumed that he was sent to her to convince or (more likely) force her to return to the Institute where Father could control the flow of information. But hearing about her son’s recent diagnosis made her question things. Could she really deny seeing her son as he was on his literal death bed?

Nora made her decision before she had time to contemplate her actions. She pulled on Nate’s old jacket that was hanging up in the closet. It was musty and the sleeves were moth-eaten, but it was warm enough to brace against the November chill.

She couldn’t just slip through the town without being seen. There were several campfires that lined the broken asphalt from here to the guard tower, but she could cut through the woods behind her house and make the climb in the dark. It would be dangerous, especially at night when most of the wasteland critters were the most active, but Nora had to do it.

Nora grabbed her gun and pocketed a couple of stimpacks and some first aid supplies. She wasn’t going far, so it didn’t make sense to carry knapsack with her. She quietly opened the door that once led to their carport and closed it behind her.

The glow of distant campfires drifted smoke and the smell of cooking food downwind towards her. She heard some laughter and some incoherent chatting, but heard no cry of alarm and, most importantly, saw no one walking around.

Nora didn’t have a flashlight and the moon was obscured behind the clouds, so her walk to the hillside took much longer than it should have. She ran into a length of fencing that spanned the outer ridge of steeper hills and small bluffs and knew that she had walked too far. She had no compass or PipBoy to navigate with, but she knew that the Vault was nearly due north from Sanctuary.

She clambered through a thicket of branches and thorns and then finally saw the dim lights of the Vault’s floodlight system. Unlike the other Vaults, this one was poorly lit and was far more dilapidated than the rest of them. In fact, she was surprised that no one had come to repurpose the Vault into a more fitting shelter. Perhaps the land was considered taboo considering how Vault Tec’s infamous reputation proceeded them even 200 years into the future. But here it stood, a tomb that would forever hold the remnants of a time long past.

Nora walked across the metal elevator. The sound that her footsteps made on the metallic platform cut through the night’s silence. She stood on the edge of the platform and looked around through the darkness for any movement or sign that Nate would be here.

Down the hillside, she could see the pinprick of light from the night campfires, and she wondered how Nick would react knowing about her deception. Although she was a free woman to come and go as she liked, meeting a synthetic replacement of her late husband in the darkness seemed clandestine and like a form of betrayal nonetheless.

“Hello Nora.”
Nora jumped at the sound of his voice and she spun around to see him walk out of the tree line. He was wearing the same clothes as last time; his black leather Courser jacket hugged his body like a second skin, and his laser rifle was holstered on his back.

“You wanted to talk again.” Nora replied, masking her nervousness with false bravado. “So let’s talk.”

“What happened to your hand?” he asked, taking note of the bandages wrapped around her knuckles and the swelling in her fingers.

“I broke it.” She replied tersely.

“Doing what?”

“I punched a guy. I was defending someone else. It was a misunderstanding.” Her cadence felt choppy, like she was under investigation for a crime she didn’t commit, and she wouldn’t give away more information than necessary.

“Jesus.” He whispered and then grinned. “My little scrapper.”

“I’m not yours.” She clarified, but then softened her tone. “Why am I here, Nate?”

“I just want to know how you’re doing.” Nate said.

“I’m fine.” Her recalcitrance was back.

Nate sighed and shook his head at Nora’s curt tone. He walked along the edge of the platform without getting closer to her. Nora followed his movement closely. Her fingers twitched over her pistol in anticipation of anything. Nate read her anxiety. His years in the military trained him to read people well. “Nora, I know you don’t trust me. In fact, you don’t have a reason to, but I’m not going to hurt you.”

“So what do you want from me?” She replied coolly.

Nate frowned. He had hoped their second reunion would’ve started off with a different tone.

“Are you happy?”

The question caught her off guard and she did a double take.

“W-what?”

“Are you happy?” He repeated. “With your life, I mean.”

“Yes.” Nora responded carefully as though she was about to be tricked by the question. “Why do you ask?”

Nate took a seat on a yellow explosives crate and leaned forward slightly, almost casually, like he was sitting on their living room sofa watching the baseball game. “Nora. I want you to be happy. That’s all that I’ve wanted for you and for Shaun.”

Nora sighed. She dropped her defenses a little and dragged the second explosive box over to Nate’s side and took a seat as well. Was she really that hardened by the wasteland to become this cynical, she thought. Even if this man was a synth, he had shown her no ill will in any of their encounters. Why shouldn’t she extend that same trust and courtesy to him?
“Happiness is a tricky thing for me Nate, you know that. It always has been, and it always will be. But I’m getting help and support from the friends that I’ve made.” She paused and chuckled quietly, “I’ve saw a therapist for a couple of times. Granted, I went to see her after I escaped the Institute because some things happened there that really messed me up. But I think it’s been a success, so far.”

Nate nodded. “I heard about what Ayo did. I’m sorry that you had to deal with that. I never knew the man personally -- I was still going through ... orientation when it happened -- but I don’t care what people say, you were within your right to kill him. I would’ve done the same if I was you.”

“Really?” Nora replied. “Father might disagree with your assessment. According to him, I’m probably the Anti Christ or something.”

Nate shook his head. “Shaun grew up in a world where overt violence is considered base and beneath him. He doesn’t condone Ayo’s actions Nora, he just despises the brutality of it all.” But seeing Nora’s disgust he quickly interjected, “I’m not saying that I agree with him. I’m just trying to get you to understand that our son was never raised with our values and morals. He was raised in a gilded ant farm where the rules of society are dictated by science, not by emotions or passions.”

“Still, he locked me up because of it.” Nora spat.

“And that’s something that I know he wishes he could erase. He reacted inappropriately --”

“-- Inappropriately? Really? Nate, he let his own mother get raped by an associate of his and then vilified her when she killed her attacker in self defense.”

Nate groaned, “Nora. If you’d just sit down with him and talk with him, I’m sure you both could talk through your issues. He doesn’t have much time you know. He keeps holding on, and its because of his health that he is still strong enough to walk around, but soon he’ll be confined to bedrest and a wheelchair.”

“Is that why you’re here Nate? To convince me to go back to the Institute to make up with my son?”

“No, but it would make me happy to have you both apologize and let bygones be bygones.” He replied. “He’s the only biological family that you have left. Do you really want your last conversation with him be about how you planned to make his life a living hell out of misguided retribution?”

“He told me that I was dead to him, so technically he started that fight.” Nora snapped.

“Jesus, Nora.” Nate sighed. “Are you really that petty. He’s your son. You two are more alike than you care to admit: passionate, stubborn, quick to lash out at people you love and then regret it later.”

Nora felt her ire bubble to the surface but she pushed it down. She couldn’t prove him right, so she schooled her face back into a neutral expression. “Why are you here, Nate? Really.”

He sighed and pulled out a envelope from his jacket pocket and handed it to Nora. The envelope was plain and white. It was thin and held no address, stamp, or return address; hell, the back of it wasn’t even closed properly.

Nora pulled out the single sheet of white lined paper and read the note from her son.

Nora,
I will not waste your time with trite pleasantries because I know you’d rather not think of me, let alone hear from me.

I am dying, and a man on his last couple months of life has a lot of time to reflect on his decisions: both good and bad.

When I am gone, the Institute needs a leader. We need someone who can carry on the Institute’s vision in the coming dawning of a new era in the Commonwealth. I think our attitudes about isolationism will need to be revisited, and I couldn’t hope for anyone better to lead the Institute than you, mother.

You may not believe that I’m sincere. I will never be able to convince you of that, I suppose, but allowing you to suffer at my hands -- at Ayo’s hands -- will forever be my biggest regret.

I have enough vitality left to talk with you topside, if you would grant me the audience. No matter what, please come alone. Grant me that discretion; consider it my last dying wish.

Nate will send word back to me. Although he can never replace the husband you lost, I’ve enjoyed getting to know my father, even in a manner as unorthodox as this.

-- Shaun

Nora swallowed the lump in her throat and her hands trembled. “He really is dying then?”

Nate nodded sadly. “I’m sorry.”

“How long do I have to think about this, about meeting him?” Nora asked.

“I’m only going to be out here for another day. I’d need your decision by tomorrow night at the latest. If you agree to meet with him, he’ll give you a week to get your affairs in order.”

“What do you mean by my affairs?” Nora asked. Deep down, however, she knew exactly what he meant.

“He’ll take your agreement to meet with him as an acceptance of your role as the new Director. The Director cannot effectively run the Institute from the wasteland, Nora. By agreeing to meet with him, and by agreeing to take on the role of Director, you wont be able to have a life here, at least not for a long while.”

“And why should I do this? I fought tooth and nail to escape Father’s clutches and from the Institute’s cage, why would I just walk back there willingly?”

“Because he can offer you an opportunity that nobody else can.” Nate replied. “As Director of the Institute, you can control the fate of everyone’s lives here in the Commonwealth. After his death, you’d be their protector, their benefactor. You could be their hero.”

Nora trudged back to her house physically chilled and emotionally numb. The choice that Nate proposed rattled around in her mind.

She entered her house and closed the door behind her. Liam was curled up in his sleeping bag, his snores were soft and his breathing was regular. However, Hancock was still awake. He was sitting at a card table that Preston had brought in from another house. Strewn across the table were a couple of empty bottles of beer, a half empty bottle of the bourbon that Nora and Nick were drinking, and a handful of spent Jet canisters.
Hancock’s eyes were unfocused and his head lolled to one side. Nora knew he was either completely drunk or high or both.

“Hey.” He said a bit too loudly.

“Hey.” Nora whispered.

“Look sunshine, I fucking up.” He slurred. He tried to get up but wobbled on his feet and sat back down.

“I know.” Nora agreed. “And now it looks like you’re trying to drink away your embarrassment.”

“Well ... Yeah, I am.” he replied slowly as though each word was palatable on his tongue. “I disrespected you, and I’m sorry. I deserved that punch. Fuck. I deserve more. But I am pissed that you got hurt because of me.”

“Well, you mostly just assaulted an one-eyed, injured man. My injury was because I was never taught to throw a proper punch, apparently.”

“NO!” But Nora shushed him. “No.” he said much quieter. “You ... were right, sunshine. I ... I came into yer town and disrespected you. You know what’d happen if someone did that to me in Goodneighbor?”

“Let me guess, you’d stab them in the street.” Nora remarked dryly.

“Exactly, sunshine!” Hancock replied with overexaggerated gestures. “But you let me off lightly. I deserve more than a slug to the face.”

“Well, I wasn’t gonna stab you, although you probably deserved it.”

“Noooo!” Hancock wined. His voice sounded alien to his own ears. “God...it’s been a while since I’ve done Ultra Jet. My mind’s a bit sloooow.” He elongated the vowels and then chucked.

“Ultra Jet? Where did you get Ultra ... Oh.” Nora thought back to Hancock’s job from earlier that day. Preston was over the moon with the quality of Hancock’s stimplacks, but Nora would’ve bet all the caps in the world that Hancock took advantage of the local resources, namely fresh brahmin dung, to experiment in the recreational side of chem making.

“That explains what set you off then.” Nora said aloud. “After you finished making stims for Preston, you decided to experiment, didn’t you?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. It was the same type of gesture that a child would make when he was caught red handed coloring on the wall with crayon. “That’s part of the story, sure.”

“Listen.” Nora snapped. Her anger was flaring back up, but Liam’s shuddering snores cut her off and she quieted her voice and tried to compose herself. “Listen. I don’t care about your chem habits as long as they don’t interfere with my life. But today, with Virgil, that crossed a line. You were acting like some sort of monster or something. You told me when we first met that you didn’t like throwing your weight around. You said that wasn’t your style. I know you want revenge for your brother, but --”

“I took Psycho, sunshine.” he mumbled.

“What?”
He looked at her, now strikingly sober, and he showed off the discolored bruise in the scarred flesh on his inner arm. “I was tryin’ to get the proportions right for my own homebrew Med-X. It’s stronger than the normal stuff and it doesn’t get you addicted as fast. But to test it to make sure its safe, I have to try it first.”

Nora cocked her eyebrow at him in skepticism, “How do you confuse Med-X and Psycho? You’re the chem expert, are you not?”

“Someone switched syringes.” He replied. “I didn’t realize what had happened until it was too late. I think someone here as a real bad Psycho problem but is switching it out with Med-X to make it look less suspicious.”

Then ghoul’s eyes lost focus again and he slumped off to the side. Nora caught him before he fell to the floor. His eyes had lost their normal chem-induced sheen, and he looked ready to pass out.

“Whud’ya doin?” He mumbled.

“Putting you to bed.” Nora replied. “We’ll talk more in the morning once you’ve sobered up. I’ll go and investigate your theory tomorrow, and then maybe I’ll forgive you for making an ass out of yourself.”

Hancock opened his mouth like he was about to protest but shut it again when he saw Nora’s glare. “M’kay, sunshine.”

Nora helped him get beneath the sleeping bag and the bedroll and then tossed him a pillow from the couch.

Although she knew it was late, Nora couldn’t go to sleep yet, and she didn’t want to deal with Hancock’s inebriation so she pulled her jacket back on and stalked back out into the street.

By now, the campfires had died down to embers and Nora had no idea where she was going to go. She meandered down the street and pulled up the collar of the old coat to shield against the bracing wind.

She spotted Nick sitting on a metallic folding chair near the dying embers. There was a thick quilt draped across his lap. She almost didn’t see him, but the glowing bud from his cigarette gave him away.

When he saw her, he rose from his seat and unfolded the blanket; it was large and thick and she even noticed that some of the fabric had been repurposed from her neighbors discarded clothes. He wrapped the blanket around her shoulders when she approached.

“You’ll catch yer death out here, doll.” He murmured.

Nora laughed but it sounded more like a bark, “I never minded the cold; its the heat that I can’t stand.”

“It’s getting late, isn’t it?” Nick asked. Of course, he knew the time. His internal programing told him that it was getting on towards three in the morning.

Nora curled her left hand around the blanket and leaned her head against Nick’s shoulders. “Can I talk to you?”

“Of course, doll. I’m always willing to listen. You know that.”
“But can I talk to you as a client with a new case, and not as your girlfriend?”

Nick shifted uneasily. Nora looked up at the synth’s luminous eyes and saw uncertainty and even a little fear. But, to his credit, he swallowed both emotions and cleared his throat. “So what’s the case?”

Nora smiled gratefully, “So there’s this person who showed up outta the blue and delivered a letter from a person from her past. It was a last will and testament of sorts and it detailed her inheritance.”

“Was it lucrative, her inheritance?” Nick asked catching on that they weren’t talking in hypotheticals, the fact of which worried him.

“It was more like a request to take over the family business.” She replied, “And by doing that, she could help so many people in ways that are hard to imagine even now, but by doing so, she’d have to leave her friends, her home, ... her lovers.”

Nick’s jaw clenched. Now he really didn’t like that they weren’t talking about a hypothetical situation. “And how did she get this letter of inheritance? The US Postal Mail has been outta business for a couple of centuries now.”

“Let’s just say a courier sent it.” She replied vaguely.

“A courier.” Nick repeated. His heart pounded loudly in his chest. “And can she trust this courier?”

“She thinks so.” Nora replied. Nick’s face was a perfect mask of neutrality, but she knew that she was breaking his heart.

Nick turned to her and the sadness in his eyes was unmistakeable. “So, you want my professional opinion, doll?”

Nora nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Nick turned his body completely towards Nora and reached out to touch her hand. When their skin met, Nora felt him gently pull her into his chest. His lips captured hers. Their kiss was long and Nick could taste the salt from her tears, he felt her sobs and kissed her through them. His kiss was possessive and firm, but he responded when Nora gently pushed him away to take a shuddering breath.

He rested his forehead against hers. They were both panting, and Nora’s breath came out in a cloud of condensation.

“I’d say to sleep on it. Think it over when you’ve had some time to process everything.”

“Are you just saying that because you don’t want me to do it?” Nora asked.

Nick looked solemn. “A woman taught me an important lesson a few months ago about making difficult decisions. If I remember correctly, I don’t have to agree, but I do have to support her decision.”

Guilt tore through Nora’s heart and she visibly winced. “I have a confession Nick. I knew about Nate before you told me. I think I told you also that lying by omission is still a lie. So, I’m sorry that I lied.”

Nick smirked, “I know.”
“What? How?”

“Doll, I have made it my business uncovering lies from even the best liars. And you, you’re not a good liar, doll. Also, I tailed you to the Vault. I wanted to make sure you were safe. He may have your husband’s memories in his head, but he’s also from the Institute, and I didn’t trust him.”

Nora shook her head and pulled Nick in again. “I have a lot of explaining that I need to do, I guess.”

“How ‘bout you get some sleep first. I’ll lay next to you and do some diagnostics and then we’ll talk when you wake up.”

"Okay." She murmured.

Nick and Nora made their way back to Nora’s house in the pitch black early morning. The candles that glowed in the windows and the dim hum of the generator made Sanctuary Hills seem alive again, albeit as a sleepy hamlet and not the festive suburbia of yesteryear. It was alive and pulsing with a new kind of life, one of new life, hope, and resiliency. Nora just wasn't sure if this was a type of life that she could live without.
Hey Jealousy

Chapter Notes

This chapter took off in an unexpected direction and it actually helped flesh out the plot for the remainder of the story. I’m excited to announce that the story will now have a third and final part -- a grande finale if you will. It’s going to be an ambitious ending and I can’t wait for you all to read it -- especially because the Brotherhood of Steel will make a full appearance, finally.

Thank you to everyone who’s read, left kudos, bookmarked, or left reviews. I try to respond directly to most of my reviewers, but time does get away from me and I don’t always get to everyone (and I feel kind of lame replying like 3 months after the fact). All of your support is appreciated. I’m actually surprised and proud that the FO4 AO3 fandom still going pretty strong three years after the fact. You all rock!

Chapter 14 -- Hey Jealousy

Nora heard Nick’s steady thumping of his mechanical heart, and she felt his warm breath tickling the nape of her neck. His arm was draped over her side, her back was pressed against his chest, and his legs were intertwined with hers. She loved feeling him against her; she felt safe in his arms.

Nick had finished his system scans hours ago, but he still let himself enjoy Nora’s body pressed against his own. Although they were both fully clothed, being next to her like this felt almost too intimate.

He heard Liam wake up first, but the boy had the good sense and the respect to tip toe out of the house without saying a word.

Hancock, however, was still passed out, face down, on the bedroll, and he’d probably remain that way until the effects of his bender had run its course through his body. Honestly, Nick was surprised by how long Hancock had lasted since his last one. He was sure that Nora was part of the reason that he managed to stay on the wagon for so long.

Nora stirred against his chest and took a couple of deep breaths before her eyes fluttered open.

“Good Morning.” She grinned and stretched.

“Mornin’ doll.” He murmured and kissed her forehead gently. “Sleep well?”

“Well, I’d rather be in a bed but I can’t complain too much. This was the first time we’ve actually slept together.” She grinned.

“And how was I?” Nick smirked.

“You kept me warm and safe, and you didn’t complain about my snoring. So I’d do it again.”

“Oh so you do know that you snore. I had to switch off my hearing for a bit.” He teased.

She grinned and kissed him lightly, “Be careful, Valentine. Soon you’ll learn about all of my bad
habits and quirks. One of them might be a deal breaker one day.”

“Not a chance, doll.” He replied got up to his feet and stretched. Nora did the same and winced as her sore muscles screamed in protest.

Hancock groaned a bit in his sleep but quickly resumed a steady, slow huff like a steam engine pulling out of the station.

Nora grabbed a bottle of purified water and a small package of aspirin and placed them on the floor next to Hancock.

“So, what d’you wanna do about him?” Nick asked. “Should we wake him up?”

“There’s nothing I really want to say to him until we investigate around the town for some answers. He claims that Psycho had somehow found its way into Sanctuary’s Med-X stash which is how he ended up taking it accidentally.”

“And you don’t believe him?”

Nora shook her head, “I don’t know Nick. I don’t know anything about chems. If I rationalize it, he had motive and he has his ... addictions, but what if his addictions are something more than just Jet and the occasional Mentats? I only know about Psycho because Nate would complain about the abuse of it in the military. He said it made his men act like animals. Sure, they were strong as hell and ferocious, but they were reckless and impulsive. Those aren’t good combinations when you are fighting a tactical battle.”

Nick sighed and glanced once more at the passed out ghoul before guiding Nora outside and shutting the door behind him. He didn’t want to say this next part in front of Hancock, even if he was passed out and still riding some trippy Ultra Jet high.

“Doll, I’m not excusing what Hancock did, but in all the time that I’ve known him, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him strung out on Psycho. Hell, if I was a betting man I’d wager that he’d rather deal with the withdrawals of Jet than take Psycho.”

Seeing Nora’s dubious look, Nick held up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “Now I’m not saying that he’s never done it, but that ain’t his vice of choice. Sure, he’ll make it and he’ll sell it for a profit, but an addiction to Psycho is a one way express ticket into the grave, ghoul physiology be damned.”

“So what do you suggest?” Nora asked. “That we just give him the benefit of the doubt?”

“No,” Nick reasoned, “but let’s start back at the source. Preston had him making chems for the town, so maybe there are other Psycho laced Med-X syringes lying around.”

Nora nodded in agreement and the two of them walked down to the chemistry station that was tucked away behind one of the remodeled houses. The walk wasn’t long; it was probably twenty feet from the main paved road, but it was strategically tucked behind some dead hedge bushes where prying eyes couldn’t see them.

The chemistry station itself looked clean. Various pieces of glassware, instruments, and scales were all neatly stacked and sorted in a milk crate to its side.

Ingredients of all types sat in a cardboard box beneath the station. Nora pulled it out and saw purple hubflowers buds, weird glowing mushrooms, and other unique and unidentifiable plants and ferns.
“Do you know what to make of any of this, Nick?” Nora asked. She had no clue how to make drugs, so the pile of assorted plant matter could’ve been the garbage pile for all she knew.

“I haven’t the foggiest clue, doll.” He replied with a frown. “I catch a lot of drug users and dealers, but that’s usually when the’ve already sold or consumed the drugs in question. But you know of someone who might know…”

“Yeah, well even if I wake him up, he’s not going to be very helpful to us while he’s hungover.” She groused.

“It would be a fitting penitence though.” Nick grinned. “The punishment would very much fit the crime.”

Nora rolled her eyes and set the box back down in the dirt. She knew that Nick only wanted to get Hancock involved because it would be gratifying to see the ghoul face his own hubris head on.

“Hey there, kid!” Mama Murphy’s husky voice called out.

Nora looked over her shoulder and saw Mama Murphy shuffling her way towards the duo. The old woman looked worse since Nora last saw her. Her rough skin was sallow and jaundice, and her claw-like fingers grasped her walking stick like a vulture sitting on a branch. She moved with deliberate slowness and wheezed with every step she took.

“Jesus, Mama Murphy. You don’t need to come to us.” Nora replied. “Here, have a seat.”

Nora dragged a folding patio chair over to her and Nick helped the ancient woman as she unceremoniously plopped into the plastic seat.

She sighed and trembled slightly, “Oh, thanks kid. Preston’s been getting on my case about walking more. He says I need to stay fit and strong and I can’t keep sitting around, but what does he know?”

She coughed a few times and each cough sounded thick and wet like a dog hacking up a bone.

“Mrs. Murphy --” Nick began.

“Oh please, call me Mama. Everyone does, kid.” She grinned a toothless grin.

He frowned and straightened himself. Nora could see that he was most certainly not going to call her Mama, no matter how much she insisted.

“Nora and I are investigating an incident that happened yesterday with one of our companions. Mayor Hancock was helping Mister Garvey bolster his chem and stimpack supply and he accidentally injected some Psycho that he thought was Med-X. Do you know anything about this?”

Nick easily fell into the detective persona, and she thought back to when they had to talk down Skinny Malone and his crazy girlfriend back in that vault; Nick might be channeling the memories of a Pre War cop, but there was something about how he composed himself that was distinctly his own.

Mama Murphy shook her head. “Nope. Sorry, kid. I have no idea what that was about. Preston’s kept me under a mandatory sobriety since I got here. I mean, word has it that your Mayor is no stranger to chems himself.”

“That’s true, but he’s no Psycho junky.” Nick replied.
Mama Murphy shrugged dismissively, “Then I guess I don’t know how I can help you.”

Nora frowned at her dismissive tone but then she noticed something peculiar flash out on the woman's pale, milky arm. “Mama Murphy, how would one use Psycho if they wanted to get high?”

“Psycho? Oh man, that’s the sweet stuff.” She said with wistful nostalgia. “It’s stronger than Jet and has more of a kick than Buffout. Taking it makes you feel like you can take on the entire world with just your fists. I mean, the only way to take it is to inject it, but once you do, you can ride a Psycho high for hours.”

“And you said that Preston has had you under mandatory sobriety since you arrived?” Nora clarified.

“Yep, and it’s been hell on the old heart. Let me tell you. Going cold turkey off the stuff I like can kill ya just as easily as an overdose can.”

Nick looked at Nora and shook his head in a “where is this going” gesture. But Nora stepped forward and bent down by Mamma Murphy’s arm.

“So, if you’ve been sober for the past ten months or so, then how do you explain this fresh bruise on your arm?” Nora asked and gently pulled back the loose sleeve of Mamma Murphy’s jacket.

Nora expected her to react with defiance or to even deny the obvious, but she smiled a cat-that-ate-the-canary-smile and cackled, “Alright, you caught me. Ain’t no use hiding it, I guess.”

“Why take Psycho?” Nick asked, “There are plenty of other recreational chems that will kill you a lot slower.”

Mama Murphy’s laugh sounded like a bark, “You think I take this shit for fun? Hell, no kid. I need it!”

“Need it for what?” Nick clarified.

“The Sight, kid. I’m a Psyker. I need it to see beyond.”

Nora rolled her eyes but Nick looked troubled. He had heard rumors of Psykers living out West in the old California territories. These people who had extraordinary mental abilities that manifested itself as psychic or telekinetic abilities were often sought out as guards or were hunted for being freaks.

“So you’ve been taking Psycho under Preston’s nose, so you can get your psychic visions?” Nora asked.

“Well, yes.” She replied as if Nora had stated the obvious. “That boy’s too busy to know which way is up most of the time. He has other problems to deal with other than mothering me. I’m a grown woman and I’m nearing the end of my life, so sue me for taking a little hit of the good stuff every now and then. I’m discrete about it. That’s why I put the good stuff in old Med X canisters. They’re less bulky and easier for my arthritic fingers to use.”

Her confession hit them both like an anvil to the head. Truthfully, Nora would’ve never expected Hancock to be telling the truth. The truth seemed so far fetched, but that didn’t stop Nora for feeling ashamed for not trusting Hancock.

"Can I count on your guys's discretion? If Preston finds out, he's gonna bust a gasket." Mama
Murphy replied.

“We can’t sweep this under the rug.” Nick scolded, “You could’ve killed someone. It’s a good think Hancock has such a high tolerance as it is. What would’ve happened if --”

“You’re not taking it away.” She snapped and she began rustling around in her jacket pocket. Her watery blue eyes were wide in fear.

“What? What are you --” Nora began

“You’re not making me give it up. I need the Sight. I need it.” She mumbled and began pawing at her coat like it was on fire.

“Calm down.” Nick said and he approached her with his hands palm up at her. “Just relax, and ... SHIT.”

Nora and Nick didn’t see the small Med-X syringe until it was already in her left bicep and she sighed in jubilant satisfaction.

Mama Murphy’s eyes rolled back in her head and she sank heavily into the armchair like she was magnetized to the fabric.

“Dammit!” Nick cursed. “Nora, you stay here. I’m going for help. She was already exhibiting signs of withdrawal. Stay by her in case she goes into cardiac arrest!”

Nora nodded and then knelt by Mama Murphy. Her hands prided open the woman’s weather-beaten, bony fingers and she gently removed the syringe from her arm.

“Kid...” She slurred.

“I’m here. You’ll be fine. Nick’s gone to get Preston. Maybe we can get you some Addictol--”

Mama Murphy’s hands grabbed Nora’s arm. Her nails dug painfully into her flesh and Nora cried out. “Ow, you’re hurting me Mama Murphy --”

Her voice was low and monotonous. Her watery blue eyes never left Nora’s gaze. “-- I see you surrounded by outstretched hands. Everyone wants you to see things their way. You’ve made a choice in your heart but you wont accept that. You’re standing with men of science out of familial duty and you’re standing with outcasts, the underdogs; two unlikely allies brought together by a common enemy. You see their humanity when no one else will. You absolve their sins and provide redemption for the repentant and you bring justice to those who insist on staying with the old ways --”

“Mama Murphy, that’s enough.” Nora pleaded and she tried to wriggle free of her unrelenting grasp but it was no use.

Her voice dropped an octave and turned harsh and raspy. She sounded like a demon. Her breath felt hot on Nora’s collar and she nearly retched at the smell of decay that drifted out from her mouth.

“Brave men and women will step forward to join your ranks. But you will sacrifice much for our world. The husband tragically taken from you and meeting the son you never raised are just the beginning...”

“Doll?” Nick’s anxious voice interrupted. “Preston and Sturges are on the way.”
Mama Murphy took one more shuddering gasp and pulled Nora nearly on top of her and wheezed into her ear.

“... Of the three who love you, one will forget you, one will cease to exist, and one will perish with your name last on his lips.”

Nick pulled Nora out of Mama Murphy’s grasp. The old woman trembled and then seized so violently that she fell to the ground. Her blue eyes fell dull and a faint trickle of blood seeped from her white nose.

She stared at Mama Murphy’s pale, lifeless body on the ground and felt the same cold grip of death clench around her heart: \textit{one will forget you, one will cease to exit, and one will perish with your name last on his lips.}

“Mama Murp -- Oh no!” Preston lamented. He pushed past Nora who stood transfixed and frozen by the turn of events. The ambiance and noise fell on deaf ears as she watched everything unfold with a detached apathy.

Preston put two fingers to Mamma Murphy’s neck and then shook his head and removed his hat. The rest of the core Quincy group: Sturges, Jun, and Marcy, crowded around them Nora broke away from the group. She never noticed that Nick’s arms were still holding her forearms. Nor did she realize that she was trembling fiercely in his grip.

“Doll, it’s okay. She was just hallucinating. The damn old bird had a problem. We couldn’t have done anything else.”

His voice sounded so far away, but Nora nodded and let Nick pull her into his body. Still, the heaviness in her heart and the anxious sweat that broke out on her skin told her otherwise.

She chalked up Mama Murphy’s first prophetic vision about seeking out The Great Green Jewel and about finding the man-who-was-not-a-man as a lucky guess. After all, they came from Quincy and everyone knew about Diamond City and their synth detective. But Nora couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling in her gut. That this second round of visions wasn’t coincidence at all, nor was it the product of a drug induced hallucination.

No. Nora knew that it was a warning.

Mamma Murphy’s sudden death caused such a commotion that day, that the entire town held an impromptu funeral service for her. Preston asked Nora’s permission for Mama Murphy to be buried beneath the large oak tree next to her husband’s grave. She couldn’t think of a good reason to say ‘no’ and she felt that she still owed Preston for his charity and graciousness, so she agreed.

When Hancock finally rolled out of bed and stumbled into the street, he saw Nora and Nick standing towards the edge of the crowd as Preston gave the eulogy.

“What happened here?” the ghoul rasped.

“We found the tainted Med-X.” Nora replied quietly. She looked around to see if their voices could be overheard, but most of the citizens were either consumed in their own grief of Mamma Murphy’s passing or in the secret relief that the old crone wouldn’t be haunting the town anymore.

“I fucked up a lot of things, but I’d never lie to you You know that right?.” He replied quietly. Nora heard the righteous vindication in his voice and her face burned hot from the shame.
“I know.” Nora whispered. Still, she couldn’t look at either of her men. She wanted to tell them about the Mama Murphy’s prophecy, but she figured that they’d laugh at her, or worse, end up actually believing her.

“And I am sorry about the whole Virgil thing.” He offered. “After this is over, d’you wanna head over with me to talk with him? I promise that I’ll be on my best behavior.”

Nora appreciated this new contrite version of Hancock, but she shook her head. “I can’t go with you, but I trust you John, and I know Virgil will appreciate the olive branch that you’re offering.”

“Why can’t you go with me? You got a hot date with Nicky tonight?” He grinned knowingly.

“No. Not exactly.” Nora replied and gently took Hancock’s hand and brought him over to the side of her old house. When she turned to face the ghoul, she saw that he still looked rough. His eyes were dull and his hands trembled no matter how hard he tried to will them to stop.

“Last night, after everything went down with Virgil, I met someone up by the vault entrance.”

Hancock didn’t like where this was going, but he waited patiently for Nora to reveal everything on her own.

She cleared her throat, “When we were back at the Starlight Drive In, I saw someone across the way in the concession stand. When I went to investigate, I discovered that we were being followed. In fact, I suspect that we were being followed ever since we left Goodneighbor.”

“And who was following us?” He replied.

Nora looked at Hancock and he noticed the remorse in her eyes, “We were being followed by a synth version of my late husband.”

Hancock did a double take. Of all of the possible responses, he wasn’t expecting that.

“A synth version of your late husband?” He repeated.

Nora nodded. “The Institute created him as a ... reward of sorts for my service as their Courser. Fortunately for me, but unfortunately for them, I left before he was finished.”

“And why are you meeting with him now? And why with Nick?” Hancock couldn’t help but let the jealousy leak into his voice.

He didn’t mind having Nick in the picture. In fact, he enjoyed seeing Nora and Nick together as much as he enjoyed being with Nora. That was because he trusted the synth. But he didn’t know anything about this copy-cat husband aside for what Nora told him when she was waxing nostalgic. He was a stranger in their relationship and Hancock was definitely not cool with that.

Her confession was imminent, “You're not going because you might try to stop what I’m about to do.”

“If it’s a bad plan, then you’re damn right I’m gonna stop you.” He growled.

Nora shook her head in exasperation, “You don’t understand, John. I don’t have a choice here. My son is dying. He has cancer and it’s terminal. He’s offered to meet with me and to reconcile after everything that happened back at the Institute. I’ll be able to make sure he’s comfortable and I’ll be by his side when he finally dies.”
“Why am I sensing that you’re gonna say ‘but’ and then drop a bomb on me.” He rasped.

“But,” Nora emphasized sadly, “In order to see him, I have to agree to some terms.”

“Of course you do.” He replied darkly.

“I’ll take over as the Director of the Institute. I’ll have complete control over the Institute’s future plans and projects. I’ll be able to stop the kidnappings and the synth replacements. I’ll be able to have the Bioscience Division begin growing more crops to then sell to the Commonwealth. The Institute doesn’t have to be isolated anymore. We can build a better future!”

“But...” Hancock interjected, still waiting for the proverbial bomb to drop.

Nora sighed, “But, I’ll never be able to see you or Nick again. At least, not until the Institute can be fully set up and functional.”

“And you don’t want me with you because you don’t want me to stop you from playin’ happy family with your son.” Hancock observed. His tone was sarcastic and Nora felt like she had been slapped.

“No, I don’t want you with me because you can’t seem to not put your foot in your mouth and stop being an ass.” She seethed. “I don’t want this, John. But I will not let my son die without me being there for him. He and I may not see eye-to-eye on anything, but I brought him into this world and I will watch him leave it. It’s my duty as his mother.”

“So what. You want my permission to let you go running back to them egghead bastards? Ya know, the very fuckin’ place that drove you to tryin’ to off yerself?”

Nora shook her head. “Like it or not, John Hancock, but I don’t need your permission to do anything. You can either support my decision or you can get out of my way.”

“But it’s a bad decision!” She heard Hancock call after her as she pushed past the ghoul and stalked down the street.

Despite the pounding headache and the cold chills that broke out across his skin from the withdrawal, Hancock followed after her at a jog.

“Look, I understand the duty to family. I hate my brother, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want justice for what happened to him.” Hancock replied quickly. “But think about how unhappy the Institute made you. That place ruined your life. They changed you. He raped you. And you’re just gonna go back to that?”

Nora trembled as she faced Hancock. It took every fiber of her self control to not explode at his accusations. “I’m not going back to that. Ayo is gone. Soon my son will be gone. The rest of those people -- Dr. Li, Dr. Binet, the synths, and the children living there -- they will have no one. If I can convince those unnamed masses who were silent to come forward and help me move the Institute in a positive direction, then I’ll feel like my fucked up life has been worth it. There are good people there, John. They’re misguided, but they are good.”

“It ain’t your responsibility to change people, Nora. You ain’t their savior. You shouldn’t have to be. Not if it means you could be hurt again.”

Nora shook her head. The irony of what she was about to say wasn’t lost on her. A year ago, when Preston asked her to lead the Minutemen and to help save the Commonwealth citizens, she turned him down. She didn’t want to be anyone’s hero. But now, standing here in Sanctuary once again,
Nora realized just how wrong she was.

“If I don’t do it, then who will?” She said.

Hancock shook his head in defeat. He knew he wasn’t going to win this argument, nor did he try to protest. Anything else would've been just empty words full of anger and jealousy. His black boots dragged through the dirt kicking up rocks and dust around his ankles. His hands were stuffed in his pockets.

Nora turned her attention back to the funeral precession. She couldn’t watch Hancock walk away from her. In some way, it felt like he was walking out on her or was giving up. And she couldn’t decide which one was worse.

“Ya ready, doll?” Nick asked when he saw Nora approach the last house on the right. The dirt trail that led up to the vault was drenched in the orange and red light of the setting sun.

“You don’t have to come with me, you know.” She replied. “I trust him enough to not harm me.”

“I know that, but I can’t help but worry. Besides, you always speak so highly of Nate so I thought I should meet the man for myself.”

Nora gave him a warm smile and pulled him into a side hug which he turned into a full embrace.

“It’ll be fine.” He replied. Although Nora appreciated the sentiment, she knew he was also reassuring himself too.

“Thank you for being understanding about all this.” She whispered.

“Go on, doll.” He smirked and gave her a gentle push up the dirt path. As she took the lead, his warm expression turned into steely resolve. He promised Nora that he’d support her decision, but that didn’t mean he expected this talk to go smoothly.

The duo walked up the hill to the vault in silence. When they arrived, Nate was already there. His back was turned to them and he was looking up at the dilapidated Vault Tec billboard that featured a happy family walking into an open Vault. The words Be Prepared For the Future embossed the billboard in giant black typeface.

“Nate, I’m back and I brought someone I’d like you to meet.” Nora called out.

The synth slowly turned around but his eyes lost a little of their warmth when he saw Nick standing next to her.

“I thought you’d come alone.” He replied.

“I know.” Nora confessed, “but I thought this would be a good chance to introduce you to someone. This is Nick Valentine...” Nora paused. She stopped right before saying 'my boyfriend'. “He’s uh...”

“I’m the detective in Diamond City. I was one of the Institute’s first Gen-2 synth prototypes but they dumped me out with the trash one day and I’ve been bumming around here since.” Nick replied, recovering for Nora’s awkwardness. His voice held a self-depreciating tone. It was the same tone that he used on the bigoted guards and residents back in Diamond City. The tone said, ‘don’t mind me. I’m just a big dope. Carry on with your business.’
“I found him in Diamond City when I was looking for Shaun.” Nora replied. “Without his help, I don’t think I would’ve ever found him.”

Nick nodded and offered his intact hand in a gesture of good will. “It’s good to finally meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you, all good things of course.”

Synth Nate looked pointedly at the detective’s outstretched hand and didn’t shake it. “Nora, I needed to talk to you alone.” He said coolly. Then he addressed Nick, “This is private business between my wife and I. You understand.”

“Nate, I’m not your wife.” Nora replied. She tried to temper her tone so it didn’t hold as much of a bite but she saw Nate flinch anyway.

Nick put his outstretched hand into his trench coat pocket. “Look pal, I’m not here to start anything. I really do mean you no harm. I’m just here makin’ sure Nora’s safe.”

“Safe?” Nate repeated and took a step closer to the synth. Nick didn’t step away. He maintained a level gaze as though he was staring down a perp during an interrogation. “Do you really think I’d harm Nora?”

“I dunno, but you seem a bit on edge right now. Anything could happen.” Nick replied smoothly.

“Nora’s my wife. I wouldn’t lay a hand on her.” Nate said through clenched teeth.

Nora sighed, “Nate, please stop. No matter how much you want to believe it, I’m not your wife. I’ll never be your wife. I’m sorry!”

“Really Nora? Are you really sorry?” Nate snipped. He took a couple steps towards her and then straightened his posture indignantly. “I know that I told you to move on and live your life if I died, but how long was I in the ground before you ran into the arms of this ... thing.” Nate gestured wildly at Nick ...

Nora reeled back as though she had been slapped, but his words awoke a fire in her that enraged her.

“That’s not fair and you know it.” She hissed.

“Isn’t it?” He replied sardonically. He had been holding in this bur in his side for too long. As soon as he realized that Nora had moved on, the truth festered inside him like an infection.

“I know it was in my will that I wanted you to move on if I fell in battle, but I was expecting you to settle down with what’s-his-name from your high school, not shack up with a robot and a man who looks like he’s been fed through a meat grinder.”

“The term’s ‘Synth Detective’ asshole, and yer not so human yourself.” Nick drawled out. “You may be a newer model synth and the Director’s pet, but, like it or not, you are just like me. So cut the insults, friend.”

This entire meeting was quickly spinning out of control. Nora had to reign it in and get them back on message.

“Knock it off. Both of you.” She admonished. “Nate, now is not the time nor the place to discuss any of this. I just came to give you my answer to Father’s letter. That’s all. This is gonna be a short meeting if we all can’t be civil with one another.”
He glared at Nick but squared his shoulders and folded his arms across his chest. “And you remember Father’s stipulations if you accept his request?”

“Yes.” Nora replied. “And I’ll follow every one of those stipulations, except for one. When I take over after his death, I want Nick and Hancock to have access to the Institute as well.”

“No.”

“No, Nora. Even if I could promise you that, what makes you think that your son is going to agree to let his Mother defile herself.”

“Oh, spare me.” She snapped. “You’re starting to sound like Ayo.”

“But it’s true!” He exclaimed. “Why do you think your son has never married? Why do you not have grandchildren at the Institute? I think you’re not understanding the importance of your position as Director. You cannot be distracted by anything or anyone. The Institute will be vulnerable during this transitional phase. We have enemies who are looking to destroy us.”

Nora’s chin jutted out defiantly, “I will not be the Institute's prisoner again. If I cannot have contact with my friends and allies in the wasteland, then I will not accept the position. This is my only demand. You can take it or leave it.”

Nate vigorously rubbed his cropped hair and let out an exasperated groan. There was no reasoning with the woman. He knew that. She could be as stubborn as a jackass (and she could sometimes act like one) but he was only following orders. Hell, he’d give Nora the moon if he could, but this request was not only impossible, it was offensive as well.

“Nora!” He exclaimed. “This isn’t my choice. I’ll take your message back to Shaun and see what he says, but I can’t make any promises.”

“Do it right now, then.” She responded. ”I know you can talk with him. I’m sure he still has the communication links working from the SRB. I want to hear you make this agreement so I know that I’m not getting double crossed here."  

“Fine!” He nearly snarled and he punched a code into a communicator on his wrist. Father’s weak, gravelly voice responded.

“Has Mother decided?” He said.

Nate’s blue eyes were famed by dark eyebrows furrowed in frustration and anger. “She has but she wishes to negotiate one of the terms. She wishes to bring her lovers with her.”

Father chuckled softly and then coughed several times. “And you told her no.”

“Yes, but she is insisting.” He replied.

There was a long pause and nobody moved. The wind that blew through the bare tree branches sounded like the rattling of bones.

“She can bring the synth as he was created in the Institute. The ghoul will remain topside. I will not negotiate on that.” He finally said in a drawn voice.

“Does she agree to those terms?” He asked Nate. Nate’s eyes shot to Nora’s and she gave an curt
head nod.

“Yes.” Nate replied.

“Good.” Father said. He coughed some more. “I will await her arrival in five day’s time. She will come to the roof of the CIT building alone. I will have someone send for the synth later. I will not negotiate on that.”

“Understood.” Nate replied. “I’ll be relaying back soon with my report on Vault 111’s tech.”

“Fine, fine.” Father replied. Nora could hear the fatigue and tiredness in his voice. “Give your report to Dr. Secord in the SRB.”

There was a quick series of beeps that came from his wrist and then he pulled his leather sleeve down across his arm again.

“Who’s Dr. Secord?” Nora asked.

“She’s the new director of the SRB. She was appointed after Ayo’s death.” He replied.

Nate grabbed a nondescript black bag that was propped up against the yellow explosives crates and slung it over his shoulder. His eyes held a steely resolve that Nora often saw as he left for drill on Thursday nights. Just then, he looked too much like her husband, and she had to look away.

“I have no other business here. Shaun will be expecting you to meet him no later than 5 o’clock on the CIT roof in five days. There’s a fire escape on the east side of the building. Apparently some Super Mutants have turned it into an impromptu base of some kind. No matter how many synths we send in to clean up the area, they keep coming back.”

Nora nodded and then took a few steps back from Nate as he requested a relay back to the Institute. He looked at her once more and cleared his throat. “You may have moved on, Nora, but I haven’t. I will never stop loving you. Nothing will change that.”

The blinding blue light of the Institute relay illuminated the dusky night and disappeared as quickly as it came.

“C’mon, doll.” Nick said and he gently guided her back down the hill.

As they walked in silence, Mama Murphy’s words came back in her ear. The three who love you...

The three. She thought. She wasn't naive to think that her future decisions wouldn't impact Nick or Hancock, but she never realized that her decisions might also affect Nate, or at least synth Nate, as well.

As she got back to town, she saw the people milling around cooking dinner and working on the odd project here and there. Marcy waddled over to June and sat next to him by the campfire. He shyly kissed her cheek and rubbed Marcy's swollen belly as though he was touching a priceless jewel.

All of these people had their own families, hopes, and dreams. Surely her personal happiness didn't override these people's needs.

She thought about Nick and his business back in Diamond City, and she thought about Hancock and the unrest simmering in Goodneighbor while he was gone. These people put their lives on pause for her. Psychic prediction be damned, she knew she'd rather die than have anyone get hurt
because of her.

Nora knew what she needed to do. As grateful as she was that Nick was willing to take all of this drama in stride, she knew that it was selfish of her to expect him to go back to the Institute -- to the very place that sparked his own insecurities and personal drama. She couldn't ask that of him.

No, this next step was just one more journey, and it would be a journey that Nora would have to walk alone.
Chapter 15 -- Running Away

After the funeral, Hancock waited for the crowd to disperse before he trudged back down the road towards Nora's old house. He stood outside the orange door but as his fingers touched the metal handle, he realized that it was the absolute last place that he wanted to be at that moment. He couldn’t just sit around and wait for Nora as she made her Faustian bargain and sold her soul back to the Institute. But when he turned to face the street again, he realized that he had nowhere else to go.

Sanctuary Hills was still up and coming. There couldn’t be no more than seventeen people including Preston and his gang of merry fools ... well sixteen now, on account of Mama Murphy, and none of them paid him any attention. Hancock would’ve normally felt insulted but he didn’t want the company anyhow.

He meandered in-between the yellow house on the right and a newly constructed wooden shack that sat on an old foundation. The gentle hum of generators and the occasional sound of a hoe cutting through dirt or the rumbling of idle chatter were the only sounds of life as people were either working in the fields behind the house or they were repairing whatever odd thing that needed fixing.

When he reached the edge of the large field that was being cultivated, he skirted around the chicken wire fencing and walked down a short hill to the river’s edge. The fence that blocked off the road from the wooden bridge became sparse the farther it ran until there was nothing except a deep line in the dirt to mark where a future addition might be added.

Considering that the place was nearly completely surrounded by walls, Sanctuary Hills would become the next Diamond City if they weren’t careful. When Hancock made it to the riverbank, he picked up a stone from the dirt and tossed it across the shallow water. The pebble skipped a mere three times before plopping in the water with a small splash.

“So did you come back to issue another round of death threats?” A voice rumbled from behind him.

Hancock jumped at the unexpected sound and wheeled around to find the source of the voice. Dr. Virgil stood before him with his hands tucked in a ridiculously large blue denim coat. Apparently the man lived down by the river. A small metal hovel stood on the hillside. The place was too small to even hold a door, so a large blue tarp hung in the doorway to provide some semblance of privacy. Virgil’s head was sporting a fresh bandage and Hancock could smell the distinct bitter aroma of antiseptic. One bleary, exhausted looking eye looked back at him, scrutinizing him.

Hancock held up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “No, I ain’t here for that, but I ain’t exactly in a good mood to talk right now. So leave me the fuck alone.”

“You’ve been in a good mood before?” Virgil drawled sarcastically. His face was tight from the raw pain emanating from his bandaged eye wound but he still managed a satisfactory grin at
Hancock’s irritation.

“Hardy fucking har.” Hancock growled and turned his back to Virgil. If the man attacked him, at least he could claim that he’d killed him in self defense. But much to Hancock’s dissatisfaction, Virgil not only did not leave him alone, but he pulled up a chair from a nearby card table and sat down.

“This ain’t a peep show, mutant. Fuck the hell off.”

Virgil chuckled which infuriated Hancock even more.

Hancock wheeled around again, “Listen, bud. I should’a killed ya back in that fuckin’ cave for what you did to my brother, but I wasn’t exactly thinkin’ straight that day. And after yesterday, I don’t think you wanna try your luck with me a third time, so if you’re here to torture me with your irritating presence and your putrid ass stench, I’m gonna go ahead and save us both the trouble and leave before I do something I regret.”

Virgil’s voice rumbled. “Actually, I was hoping we could talk.”

Now that got Hancock’s attention. “I ain’t got nothin’ to say to you.”

“That’s probably true, but I have some things to say to you if you’d listen to them.” He replied.

Virgil gestured his hand to the other vacant chair. “You can even move it back to the river’s edge if you wish. I don’t want to offend you with my ‘putrid ass stench’.” The sarcasm in his voice was thick, “I must confess that I’m not accustom to the lack of hygiene that you people are so use to.” Hancock thought a moment about joining Virgil. He really didn’t have anything better to do besides drive himself crazy with worry about Nora, and maybe this powwow with Virgil would help smooth the bumps that were starting to form in Nora and his relationship.  He snatched the vacant chair and dragged it through the dirt and sat it on a flat piece of ground about ten feet away from the man.

Virgil nodded in satisfaction. “Thank you.” He cleared his throat with a short cough and continued, “Look. I know what you think of me. To you, I’m a murderer. I’m a monster, and you probably think that killing me will be your good deed for the day. There’s nothing I can do to convince you otherwise, in fact, I don’t want to. I deserve every wounding comment, every scathing insult, and every judgement that you could ever throw at me. In fact, I won’t even rise to my own defense.”

The ghoul sat back in his seat. In his time as mayor, he’d heard his fair share of apologies and seen his share of prostrating citizens begging for forgiveness. Almost all of them turn back into the same ‘ol scumbags that they were before. True remorse was rare which is why Hancock had to institute his own form of justice every now and again. He figured that Virgil was just acting like any other low life by saying what they wanna hear but not ever fucking changing.

“Why should I believe you?” He growled. “I don’t know you. You could just be telling me what I want to hear to save your own ass.”

“Whether you believe me or not is your choice. But I’ve heard whisperings around this town about you Mayor Hancock. About that town you run and about the man you are. You respect loyalty above anything else, do you not?”

Hancock shrugged, “Sure, any leader needs people who are loyal to him. But how the fuck would that stop me from killing you?”
Virgil didn’t move. It was probably better that Hancock was sitting so far away from him because his hands were trembling fiercely in his pockets as he channeled any and all remaining courage he had to propose this next plan.

“It doesn’t.” He rumbled. “Look, I can’t bring your brother back, but I can do something to fix the damage that I’ve already caused. Who knows? Maybe I’ll die in the process because this plan I’ve been concocting is going to be dangerous.”

Hancock cocked his eyebrow, “I’m listening.”

“When I escaped The Glowing Sea, I managed to take my most important work with me. I have two intact vials of my completed serum. When Nora was sent to exterminate me on the Institute’s orders, she swapped out her laser cartridges for my serum and loaded them into a syringe rifle. I was out of my mind by then. The FEV virus had firmly taken hold of my mind; I was gone and the beast had taken control, but I awoke to discover that my serum managed to counteract the FEV and turn me human again. Since then, I realized that I had to continue my work in some way.”

“What makes you think your serum will work now? Some of these mutants have been around since before I was born.” Hancock inquired. “You were a mutant for what, a year at most?”

“Yes, and I don’t know for sure if this will work so that’s why I need to do more tests, but I can offer the Commonwealth hope. If I can synthesize more of this serum from my blood, then I could start running live tests, and eventually I could issue a nervovirus vaccine to counteract the FEV. Theoretically, I could develop a Super Mutant cure.”

“And how the fuck does that help me?” Hancock growled. “I wait God-knows-how-long to see if this pans out on the promise that you might be able to cure Super Mutants?”

“It helps you, because in exchange for a place to conduct my experiments, I offer you my unwavering loyalty. I would be at your beck and call to provide medical help to your citizens.”

“We already got a doc in Goodneighbor,” Hancock drawled lazily.

Hancock was bluffing. Dr. Amari was an invaluable asset, of course, but she didn’t handle the day-to-day routine sicknesses and she despised handling addicts who just needed a course of Addictol to get them through the day. Having Virgil there would certainly help balance things out, and it would free up a considerable chunk of Hancock’s work day when he didn’t have to answer every single call about one of his citizens overdosing.

“Would it really be that problematic to have another one?” Virgil shot back. “This world isn’t exactly safe.”

“What’s your game here, brother?” He asked. “I mean, I don’t particularly like you, so why commit to working for me? I ain’t gonna get nicer the more you get to know me.”

Virgil straightened in his chair, “I don’t need you to be nice. But I need a place to live that has access to more sophisticated medical equipment. I’ve been fighting off an infection and I need stronger chems and antibiotics to counteract it than what we have here. Look, you may doubt my motives. Hell, you may even doubt my loyalty, but I worked for the most vilified organization in all of the Commonwealth, and although I did voice my concerns and objections about the FEV program, I still stayed with them. It took me nearly twenty years to finally leave. How’s that for loyal?”

Hancock’s coal black eyes scrutinized the man across from him. He didn’t doubt Virgil’s
intelligence nor his competence. He saw him in action back at that cave when Nora was close to death's door; he operated swiftly and efficiently while the man to save Nora's life.

No, Hancock could see the benefits of having Virgil under his employment but a significant drawback was that Hancock would have to look at the very man who probably turned his brother into some hulking, smelly mutant. Then again, he's looked at worse types of people everyday and he knew that Goodneighbor needed another doctor.

“You think you can be ready to leave by tomorrow?” Hancock asked and he rose from his chair and walked to Virgil.

“I came here with nothing except my serum, I don’t have much to pack.” Virgil retorted.

Hancock’s jaw clenched. He didn’t exactly like the idea. The man didn’t know how to fight nor did he look all that healthy. It would be wishful thinking on his part to have Virgil die on the journey back to Goodneighbor, either from sickness or an unfortunate accident, but the old adage of “keep your friends close and keep your enemies closer” came to mind.

“I ain’t gonna go easy on ya, brother. But if you make it to Goodneighbor with me, then consider yourself the new town doctor.” He replied. “After that, I’m giving you a year to make headway on this science experiment of yours. If it falls short or if it fails, consider yourself my public enemy number one.”

Hancock held out his mottled hand. It was a sign of a temporary truce and Virgil’s pale, large hand accepted it gratefully.

After that disaster of a negotiation, Nora stood in the middle of the road in Sanctuary at a literal and figurative crossroads. She considered going back to her old house and drinking herself into oblivion to forget that this day ever happened. But the escapism she was looking for came more in the form of a brief field trip out of the town.

Nora turned right and walked quickly towards the wooden watchtowers and the entryway door. The same female guard that let them in regarded Nora with detached apathy.

“You leaving us?” She asked in a droll and bored tone.

“Yes, can you please open the gate?” Nora replied.

The woman signaled to another guard that was perched on the watchtower and he flipped a switch that was attached to a wooden pole. The metal door swung open noiselessly and Nora walked through it quickly. She didn’t know where she was going, but she figured that her body would choose a place instinctually.

Once she crossed the dilapidated wooden bridge, she saw the Red Rocket gas station and knew that she had found the perfect hideout. It was close to Sanctuary, it still was deserted, and it was a small building where Nora could hole up for as long as she needed to.

“Doll?” She heard Nick call out from behind her.

Nora turned to look at him. "I'm just going for a walk. I'll be back."

The synth looked worried, "Would you mind the company? I need to stretch my legs too."

Nora knew what he was doing. Nick was trying to make sure that she wasn't going to run away.
Regardless of his motives, she was glad he was there. She reached out her hand; it was an invitation, no it was a prayer, that said, ‘I need you right now’.

Nick jogged up to her and grasped her hand. His touches were gentle, but Nora gripped his hand firmly as though she thought he would disappear.

They made it to the old Red Rocket gas station and Nora slowed her pace down to a slow walk. The building didn’t look any different since her last visit with Codsworth, in fact, she could still see the picked-clean skulls of the mole rats that once lived beneath the ground.

The garage that was once filled with auto mechanic tools and other assorted junk had been gutted out, and its red garage door was closed. When she peaked in the dirty window, she saw a small metal-framed bed tucked into the corner. It was the only piece of furniture and it looked like a prison cot as it stood next to the stark concrete walls.

Nora entered the door to the left of the garage and dragged her hands along the dirty linoleum countertop. The coffee pots sat broken in their holders and old editions of the Boston Bugle were waterlogged from the rain; their decaying forms sat on the countertops in a moldy pile of pulp.

She heard the door squeak closed as Nick filtered in behind her. She could smell the tobacco wafting up through the air; hell, even the smell of his smokes took the edge off her anxiety and lessened the fist that clenched her heart.

“You okay, doll?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know. I just needed to get outta there I think. Get some fresh air and some perspective.”

She was starting to sound like Hancock, she realized. She stopped at the end of the counter and looked down towards the small office. There were no lights and as evening crept in on them, shadows crawled across the walls like melancholy specters.

“You’re worried about going back there” He murmured. It was an observation and Nora didn’t respond. “I’ll be with you this time, doll. You know that. You fought for that.”

Nora nodded, but in retrospect, she regretted demanding that Nick could come with her. She acted impulsively. She just couldn’t stand the thought of never seeing Nick again. However, a synth, even a prototype, arriving back in the Institute could spell more danger for Nick than it could for Nora. According to many, Nick was nothing more than property. He was no more than a vastly intelligent tool used to serve a human’s purpose. Could she bear it more if Nick wound up dead because of her selfish desires?

“All of this is going to be incredibly dangerous.” She warned.

“So was chasing after that Courser,” Nick replied. “but we survived.”

Nora turned to him. The image of Nick being carried out of the Old State House by Hancock and Dr. Amari flashed across her mind like lightning. “What if we don’t?”

Nora stopped herself shy of adding, what if you don’t.

Nevertheless, Nick seemed to glean the words that went unspoken between them. “I know you’re scared, but it’s gonna take a lot to kill either of us. You and I both got the scars to prove how strong we are. Besides, I don’t think those Institute boys are going to treat you in the same way as last time. At least not since you proved that you’ll fight back if provoked.”
“But what if I can’t protect you?” Nora whispered. There, she thought, another nagging anxiety was out in the open. “What if you arrive and you’re forced into slavery, or what if they permanently deactivate you for being a distraction to me, or what if they try to do experiments on you, or what if --”

Nick silenced her fears with a gentle kiss. He rested his forehead against hers and smirked, “Thinking about all those hypotheticals are just gonna mess with your mind. I can take care of myself, doll.”

She scoffed. “And you got the rips and tears to prove that, that’s for sure.”

“They’re normal wear and tear, doll.” He replied with a light hearted grin but dropped it when he saw that Nora wasn’t smiling.

“If you don’t care about yourself, then what about Ellie? What about the Agency?”

“Ellie will be fine for a while. I’ll leave her some instructions and check in once more before you’re expected to be at the CIT. Besides, I’ve been employed in Diamond City for almost fifty years. I don’t eat, I don’t sleep, and my one main vice can be easily scavenged for free from any cigarette machine in the Commonwealth. We aren’t at risk of losing the farm. Besides, maybe this will give her the push to move on to bigger and better things than filing papers and taking notes in my old hoarder house, as you called it.” Nick replied.

Nora still wasn’t convinced. She ran her fingers through her hair. The left part that was once buzzed close to her scalp now tickled her chin while the longer part reached the nape of her neck. She didn’t want either of her men to take such risks on account of her, especially not by putting themselves on the front lines with her. She couldn’t deal with the guilt if either of them were hurt because of her carelessness.

“Nora, look at me.”

She did and Nick’s yellow eyes blazed passionately.

“I don’t take this lightly. I understand the risks of going there with you. But we have to think about this pragmatically. The Institute is the Commonwealth’s most dangerous enemy as it stands now. If you take it over, you’ll have a helluva reputation to undo. But if you manage to do that, then I think that the technology and resources that they have could help many people. And understand that this ain’t just a pipe dream, Nora. I’ve spent my entire existence hating the Institute for what they did to me -- to Nick -- but what if you could use their powers for evil and turn it in to something better?”

“And you’d be willing to go back into the very bowels of Hell itself for me to turn it into a paradise?” Nora clarified.

The skin around Nick’s luminous yellow eyes tightened imperceptibly and she saw that Nick had complete and total confidence in his next statement. “Nora, I would go to the ends of the Earth for you.”

She shook her head in disbelief. She couldn’t believe that one man could love her so much. That one declaration moved her to tears.

“Kiss me, Nick.” Nora whispered.

He did and when their lips touched, he could taste the salt from her tears. One hand pulled possessively at his coat lapel while the other one -- the injured one -- gently cupped his ruined jaw.
Her lips quivered when they broke away and she immediately chased his lips for another kiss.

Her tongue gently laved over his bottom lip and he parted his mouth slightly to let her in. They kissed each other with melancholy longing and Nora’s lips trembled as she fought down the burgeoning emotion that rose to her chest.

“It’s okay, doll.” Nick murmured to her forehead. “Let it out. Don’t bottle this shit up inside you.”

“Maybe later. For now, I just want you Nick.” She replied and slowly unbuttoned the overly large jacket and the plaid long sleeve work shirt that was beneath it.

The process was slow going on account of Nora’s broken hand, but Nick took the time to plant kisses that ranged from her forehead, down her temple, to her cheek, and then ended at her collar bone. Their pace was slow, much too slow, and in her haste, Nora ripped the last two buttons out of her jacket as she tried to disrobe and they clattered to the floor.

Nick broke away from her briefly and shrugged off his coat and put it on the ground like a blanket. He knew that this would be hell on the old joints and bones tomorrow.

“We need to get into the habit of doing this in a bed again.” He quipped and sucked gently at the junction between her neck and her shoulder.

“At least we don’t have to worry about anyone from the Railroad walking in on us.” Nora mused as she undid Nick’s tie and ran her hands up underneath his dress shirt feeling the pliant skin beneath.

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Nora bucked her hips up against him. The cold evening air teased along her skin like a second pair of hands caressing her.

She cleared her throat but her voice came out breathy and weak nonetheless, “I’ve had sex in the park, under the bleachers at Fenway Park, in the back of a car...”

Her voice faltered as Nick’s fingers journeyed in between her breasts and he cupped her cheek. He laved his tongue around her nipple once more and then drawled, “Well now you can add a Red Rocket gas station to that list.”

Nora’s giggle transformed into a lusty moan as Nick’s skeletal hand gently teased across her erect and moist nipple.

“Take your underwear off, doll.” He growled.

Nora’s hands quickly grabbed the elastic at her hips and shucked the garment off her body as though it had burned her.
Nick wasted no time and gently parted her legs and settled down on his stomach; he ate her like a man who was dying of thirst. For every obscene sound that came from his attentions, Nora met it with moans and breathy cries of her own.

He attacked her with gusto and for a blissful moment all of her fears and anxieties melted away as her mental energy went to feeling every lick, nip, and suck of her wet slit.

His tongue teased over her clit from all different directions. His hands held her legs open and she felt completely and totally exposed.

Every time Nick moved away to plant kisses and gentle nibbles on the inside of her thighs, the cold air chilled her sodden sex and it felt like another lover was continuing where Nick had left off.

“Come for me, doll.” He growled and his eyes gazed down the length of her body like a predator that was about to attack. “I wanna hear you say my name.”

“Oh, God.” She whimpered as he resumed his oral ministrations. Her hands groped at her breasts and she pinched one rigid nipple between her fingers. The ache she felt bordered on being painful but it was enough of a sensation to spark her climax.

“Nick!” She wailed, bucking against his mouth as she felt her climax electrify her system. “Oh God!”

Yet, he didn’t give her a chance to recover. Instead he said, “C’mere doll.” and flipped Nora over so she straddled his waist.

Nora’s legs were trembling from her climax and she knew that her knees would probably be scraped up from the concrete floor, but still, she didn’t mind.

Nick’s gaze held her so captivated that she didn’t notice the faint clinking of his belt buckle nor the subtle rustling of him tucking his dress pants down below his ass.

“Nick, what are you --” But he cut her off with another kiss.

He pushed her hips over his own and gently guided her down onto his lap. Her damp slit met synthetic paneling where a human’s erection would be and found that there was indeed nothing there.

Nick squeezed his eyes shut, partially because he needed to concentrate and mentally divert energy to that area to artificially enhance the sensation, but also because he couldn’t bear it if Nora’s face held any -- even an ounce -- of mockery at the expense of his anatomic deficiency.

He gently guided her hips so she moved, well more like glided, across the pliable skin on his pelvis. Her entire pussy was electrified and hypersensitive from her climax which made the simple act of touching exquisite and intoxicating.

“Nick, c-can you feel me?” Nora groaned in disbelief.

“Yes.” He panted. That single word held so much satisfaction, vindication, and amazement that Nora beamed with pride. She remembered how embarrassed he was when she first tried to explore below the belt, and she was afraid that he’d always be too self-conscious to let himself be fully intimate with her.

She rocked against him harder and lowered her body across his, breasts smashed against his chest; she cupped both sides of his face and pulled him into a languid kiss.
His hands grasped her bare ass and helped guide her hips to follow a consistent pattern. Her clit dragged against his smooth skin like she was riding velvet.

“Nora!” His cries were unbridled, unrestrained, and that drove Nora on. She wanted to make Nick come undone. She wanted to make Nick come.

She moved faster against him. She took in the sight below her with satisfied glee. Nick’s chest heaved and his skeletal metal hand clawed at the ground. His face was screwed up in a combination of sheer disbelief and intense pleasure.

“Tell me what you want, Nick.” She panted.

Except he couldn’t. His mind couldn’t formulate the words. Every part of his synthetic brain was operating at full capacity to process and decode the pleasure he was receiving from the sensors and nerves that were laced through his body. Instead, he grabbed Nora’s hips and held her on the exact right spot where the sensations were the strongest.

“Nora!” He nearly screamed her name out but his lungs couldn’t take a proper breath so it came out in a chocked whimper. The entire lower half of his body trembled beneath her and that was enough to set her off once more.

The last thing he heard was Nora whimpering as the continued stimulation became too much for her. Then he tumbled into the blackness.

Nora collapsed onto his chest panting and sweating beneath her open flannel shirt. The cold night air nipped at her skin so she dressed quickly and then curled up against his body. Nick’s face was completely slack, his mouth was partially open, and Nora could hear the occasional trill and beep come from his chest.

“Nick, you okay?” She whispered and gently kissed his chin. He grunted a little which eased her fears and she figured that he needed time to process all of the stimuli.

She couldn’t help but grin as she looked down at her handiwork. Nick’s pale blue thighs and his bare pelvis shimmered in the moonlight. She pulled a handkerchief from her coat pocket and gently cleaned up the evidence and then pulled his dress slacks up over his hips.

Nick panted as his senses swam back into focus. His hearing came first and everything around him sounded almost sharper and more acute. He blinked a few times and saw the water stains and the cobwebs that decorated the ceiling with perfect clarity. And he saw Nora grinning at him like the cheshire cat as she cinched the buckle on his belt.

“How are you feeling?” She asked smugly.

“Pretty good, doll. What about you?”

“Yeah, me too.” She replied.

Nick sat up and looked around feeling slightly disoriented. He plucked his hat from the dirty ground and put it back onto his head. Nora helped him to his feet and and picked up his trench coat off the floor. The tattered thing was completely filthy from their frenzied coupling and from the dirty ground but Nick didn’t care at that moment. His body was screaming at him do run a diagnostic scan, or to power down into a reboot cycle, in order to balance out the wild fluctuations that he had just experienced.

“So...how did you discover that you had this particular function?” Nora grinned.
Nick pulled his coat on with a coy smile. “I’m a detective, doll. I know how to find information.”

Nora’s grin grew into a smile. “Finding information, hm? That’s the weirdest name for mastrubation that I’ve ever heard.”

“Very funny.” He drawled, “Yeah, well I kind of missed out on Nick Valentine’s awkward teenage years in the ol’ archives, so I had to do a little research on my own.”

“And what sources did you consult?” Nora asked, relishing in Nick’s burgeoning embarrassment.

“I’m never disclosing that secret, doll.” Nick rumbled and the look on his face told Nora that she’d never get it out of him.

“But was it worth it, at least?”

Nick’s thin mouth turned into a hungry grin. It was an expression that she was more accustom to seeing on Hancock’s face. “Doll, if I didn’t think they’d send a search party out after us, we’d probably never leave this damn gas station.”

“I’d be okay with that.” She replied.

Nick longingly glanced over at the corner of the gas station where they had just made love but then shook his head. “C’mon, doll. Let’s go before Hancock finds us in a compromising situation.”

“I don’t think he’d complain if he walked in on us.” Nora grinned.

“No,” Nick replied as he considered that the ghoul had absolutely no shame when it came to anything sexual, “He’d probably want to join.”

Nora laughed. It was a sound that spread from the bottom of her belly and traveled up through her chest, and for one blissful moment, she forgot about what she was about to do and simply lived in the moment.

That night, Nora ate dinner with Hancock, Liam, Preston, and Sturges around the campfire. Nick joined them but didn’t eat. He and Sturges were deep in conversation about the various improvements that still needed to be made to the town. Meanwhile, Preston was telling Liam and Hancock about the time that he saw a deathclaw eviscerate a raider camp it had wandered into. Hancock nodded with grim understanding, but Liam listened simultaneously enraptured and terrified of the idea that a mutated lizard could do that type of damage. As they talked, they passed around bowls of boiled tatos, corn, and radstag venison.

Nora listened to their stories quietly and ate her food. She had far too much on her mind to contribute much to their conversations. Nora planned to take her already packed bag and escape into the night. She planned to slip out of her house and cut across the small creek in the back and then cut back up the hill to Vault 111 before heading west towards the nearest settlement: Abernathy Farm.

From there, she planned to journey south and come in to Boston from the west. After all, she did have five days to kill so taking the scenic route to Boston wasn’t a problem, but her main priority was to get into contact with the Railroad. The only problem was that she didn’t know where they were now that their headquarters at the Old North Church had been compromised.

She barely remembered Nick and Hancock talking about Desdemona visiting Goodneighbor but she knew that a woman as wily as Desdemona wouldn’t stay in one place for long. No, Nora would
just have to keep an eye out for any signs that the Railroad were hiding out and hope she found Des in time before she had to meet Shaun. She knew that it was a terrible plan, but at least it was better than nothing.

Nora rose from her seat by the fire and took her empty bowl over to a plastic basin full of arabaxo cleaner and water. She washed her bowl with the rag that floated in the soapy mixture and put the damp bowl into an empty basin meant for clean dishes.

“Hey, all. I’m gonna head off to bed. G’night.” She announced.

“Goodnight.” Preston replied.

“Hey Nora, let me walk you to the house.” Liam replied.

Before Nora could refuse, the young man sprung up from his seat and made it to Nora’s side with a happy-go-lucky grin.

“Uh, thanks Liam.” She replied and then looked towards Nick and Hancock.

“Goodnight, doll.” Nick replied with a distracted wave and dove back into his conversation with Sturges.

“Goodnight, sunshine. I’ll be in soon.” Hancock replied. “Nicky’s got first watch tonight.”

“C’mon Nora, I wanna show you something cool.” Liam replied and gently guided her away from the group.

They walked through the darkness, but once they got out of earshot of the group, Liam whispered, “You’re leaving aren’t you.”

“What? Why would you think that?” Nora replied but both she and Liam knew that her lie wasn’t going to work.

“Nora, I know about Father’s deal. I know about the plan for you to take over the Institute. I heard you and Mayor Hancock arguing about it the other day.” He replied.

She sighed, “I’m sorry, Liam. I have to go back. And you have every right to be mad at me. You risked so much to get me out of there, and don’t think that I’m not appreciative, but things have changed.”

“I know.” He replied. “That’s why I have a favor to ask you.”

“What?” Nora’s voice expressed both astonishment and curiosity.

Liam glanced knowingly at her. Even in the dark, Nora saw the conspiratorial look on his face. “I know you’ll need a majority vote to become Director. I also know that my father will be one of the department heads that you’ll have to convince. But I don’t think he’ll vote for you on account of what happened. Even though he hates Father for what he did, he’d rather see the Institute crumble beneath itself than put someone connected to Father in power.”

“Why is that?” Nora inquired.

“Well, I’m sure that he thinks I’m dead. I mean, I know how he thinks, he's my dad. He has always considered the Commonwealth as a barren, decaying wasteland. Exiling people from the Institute is considered a death sentence.” Liam responded. “And since I’ve had no way of communicating
with him, I’ve had no way of letting him know that I’m alive so I want you to take this to him instead.”

He placed an orange holotape into her hand and closed her fingers around it. “Sturges showed me how to use his holotape recorder. It’s an older model than what we have in our living quarters, but I know the cartridges will be compatible. I’ve left a message for my father. I want you to give this to him. If he knows that I’m alive and that I’m doing well, he’ll be more likely to put aside his anger and help you.”

Nora pocketed the holotape. “Thank you, Liam. I promise that I’ll get this to him. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to know you’re doing so well here.”

The duo had reached the orange door that led to her house. Candles flickered in the window sills, and Codsworth sat in the corner of the living room in his powered-down state doing system scans. Nora turned to Liam and pulled the kid into a hug. As she held him, she realized that ‘kid’ was the wrong word as he surpassed her in height and the manual labor was molding his body into that of a man’s.

“Goodbye Liam.” She murmured. “Thank you for giving me my life back.”

“Thank you for showing me that there’s more to life than the Institute.” Liam replied. “They’re wrong about a lot of things, Nora. But I know you’ll set them right.”

She hugged him tighter and then let him go. Before he could walk away, she called out, “Liam, wait. I have one favor to ask you.”

“Anything, Nora.”

“Can you distract Hancock for twenty minutes or so? I have one last thing to do here before I go.”

Liam grimaced at the idea of getting on the ghoul’s bad side but still nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you.” She replied. “Liam, your dad should be proud of you. You’re an incredible young man.”

Even in the darkness, Nora could see the faint blush rise beneath his fair skin. He gave her a final wave and walked back towards the campfire with his hands in his pockets.

When Nora closed the door, she knew that she had to act quickly. She tore out two pages blank introductory pages from the front of an old waterlogged telephone book that she found in Nate’s old ‘junk drawer’ in the kitchen and wrote her messages shakily with a broken pencil.

_Nick --_

_By the time you've read this, you’ll know where I’ve gone._

_After much thought I realize that I can’t be selfish with you. I could give you every reason, every justification, as to why I did this, but I know you’ll counter each and every one of my arguments with your own._

_When we first met, I thought I’d never be whole again. I thought that I’d have to live with the pain of my past and deal with life on my own and without anyone’s support. But it’s because of your love and support that I was able to make it back home -- back to Sanctuary -- a changed woman._

_You built me up and gave me strength and now I have to go back out into the world and share it_
with the world. I don’t want this to be goodbye. I never want to say goodbye to you. So I’ll just say this: take care of John and take care of yourself. Do this for me.

I love you.

Nora.

The first note flowed freely, although not without pain. She stared at the second sheet of paper for a good five minutes before she wrote her second confession with trembling fingers.

John --

When we first met, I hated the man you were, but during our travels together, I began to see how wrong I was to judge you so harshly. You are loyal, compassionate, and fiercely protective of your own. You call me on my bullshit, even when I don’t want to hear the truth, and I thank you for that. John, I love you. It took me a long time to say it, and writing it makes it seem so final, but it’s true and it will always be true, no matter what happens in the future. I wish we left things on a better note. You’ll be pissed at me, that I’m sure, but I hope you’ll come to see that I’m doing this because I care about you, and not in spite of you.

I owe my life to you, John. The only way I can repay that debt is by living well. You’ve seen me in my darkest moments, but one day, I hope you’ll be able to see me at my brightest.

Take care of Nick. You both need each other as much as I needed you both.

Always yours,

Nora

She left the notes on the countertop beside Hancock’s personal Jet stash and then she grabbed her backpack. Although she didn’t have the courage to go into her son’s room, she did grab clothes out of her dresser. She took the skirts and blouses that were in adequate condition, and she even grabbed a couple of button down shirts and dress slacks for Synth Nate. She figured that a small kindness like that would help grease the wheels in their tumultuous and strange relationship.

Nora took one more glance back at her house and slung her pack over her shoulder. Her hand gently grasped the brass door knob that once lead out to their carpark and opened the door and closed it quietly behind her. She stole out into the night and skirted along the back of the houses until she caught the trail that led back to Vault 111.

She took one last look over Sanctuary Hills and saw dark shadows of people slowly milling about. Some were headed to bed while others stood in the middle of the road bartering with the traveling merchant that had just arrived there that night. She didn’t stay very long. Sanctuary Hills was no longer her community. Like most of the Commonwealth, it had been repurposed and changed to fit this new and crazy world.

Nora wasn’t bitter, in fact she was happy to see that Sanctuary was a thriving community once again, but it was a community that no longer needed her.

“Goodbye.” She murmured.

Chapter End Notes
The secret to Nick's sexual enlightenment is in his 'bro talks' with Sturges. For a man/synth as handy as Sturges is, Nick figured that he'd have a solution to compensate for not being equipped. And does he ever ... but the discussion was incredibly awkward for both involved. Go ahead and read that discussion in the one-shot fic entitled "Mechanical Engineering."
Chapter Notes

For this storyline, I am working under the assumption that the events of FO3 went the Evil Ending/Evil Karma route. Without spoiling too much of the information that I will reveal later, here’s the bare bones head cannon that I’m working with.

1. The Female LW is still alive, her base of operations is at Tenpenny Tower, she has Evil Karma (I’m purposely leaving that vague)

2. The events for the evil ending all occur canonically. These include: James’s death, Lyon’s death, Sarah Lyons’s sacrifice due to the LW’s betrayal, Project Purity’s failure/corruption, the FEV is released into the water, Megaton is destroyed, and the Enclave have control over the Capital Wasteland.

3. Some events will also include semi-cannon/con-confirmed head cannon which will be revealed in the plot of this story.

Chapter 16 -- One If By Land

“What d’you mean she’s gone?” Hancock snarled at Liam.

“Where did she go, kid?” Nick asked. Although he was more level-headed than the ghoul, the tone in his voice indicated that now wasn’t the time to play around.

“I -- I don’t know.” Liam floundered for an answer that would satisfy them. “She didn’t tell me. I’m sure she figured that I’d tell you guys if I knew.”

Hancock paced across the living room floor. The note that Nora had left for him was crumpled up in his fist. When Liam came back to the campfire after walking Nora to the house, he asked Preston to tell him one more story about the Commonwealth. The little weasel sat there enraptured once again and Hancock decided to stay and listen as well. He thought that an extra few minutes wouldn’t hurt anything, after all, Nora would just be asleep, but by the time he entered the house and found that Nora’s belongings were gone, he knew it was too late.

Nick’s own note sat folded up in his trench coat pocket. He hadn’t read it yet, but based off of Hancock’s reaction to his own note, he figured that he wouldn’t want an audience present when he did.

“Kid, you need to tell us exactly what you talked with her about. Recount the entire conversation with us. Maybe we can figure out her plan based on what she told you.” Nick said.

Liam complied, partially because he was afraid that Hancock would become violent if he disobeyed, and told them both about the entire conversation, including giving her the holotape message meant for his father.

“You just saw this as an opportunity, didn’t ya?” Hancock growled and rounded on the boy. “You figured that Nora could be your own personal courier to get your message back to dear ol’ Dad back in the Institute. It never fucking crossed your mind to talk her out of it, huh? I mean, you were
sent here for helping her escape the first time and now you’ve gone and thrown her under the fuckin’ bus! Or was this your plan all along?”

“Hancock, that’s enough.” Nick snapped.

Liam's wide-eyed look held astonishment and guilt. He never expected this would be their reaction and he wondered if he did the right thing after all. “Shit, I -- I’m sorry. I just wanted to help Nora.”

“And you can help us now by helping us find her.” Nick replied.

“Yeah, well even if we do find her she’s just gonna keep runnin’.” Hancock cut in. “She is fuckin’ determined no matter what we say otherwise.”

“Look, she couldn’t have gone far.” Nick reasoned. “The longer we wait, the more likely that the trail will have gone cold.”

“We don’t know which direction she took off in!” Hancock exclaimed. “Unless you wanna send out a search party across all the fuckin’ Commonwealth, we ain’t ever gonna find her.”

Nick sighed. He knew the cruel reality of missing persons cases in the Commonwealth. People ran away all the time. Most of the time it was to Goodneighbor, but even then, it took Nick at least a good week to track down a missing person in Boston proper. Nora, however, was hiding out in the Commonwealth wilderness and so the likelihood of finding her was slim to none.

“You’re right.” He replied grimly. “But at least we know where she has to end up. In five days, she’ll meet Father on the roof of the CIT building. Even if we can’t track her down now, we know that she’ll be there by then.”

Hancock shook his head in disgust, “I told her that this plan was stupid, but she never fuckin’ listens.”

He sounded helpless and Nick empathized with the feeling, but he had to temper the ghoul’s anger somehow. “Hancock, our girl’s come a long way. She’s capable of taking care of herself; in the meantime though, we just gotta have faith.”

Liam looked at the two men and felt miserable. “Look, I’m sorry. If there’s anything I can do to make this up to you, I’ll do it.”

Hancock shot the boy a venomous look and Liam could see the muscles in his jaw clench, but to the ghoul’s credit, he kept his mouth shut.

“Franky, it’s too little too late, Liam. The best way to help us now is to take care of yourself. Go see if Preston needs help, and when we leave, I want you to stay here. Sturges will teach you some practical skills, you’ll learn how to live off the land, and you’ll have a place to stay. This town is as safe as you’ll get in the wasteland. In fact, it’s probably safer considering what’s to come.” Nick replied.

Liam nodded glumly and left the two men alone with their brooding thoughts.

“Fuckin’ idiot kid…” Hancock muttered under his breath.

“He’s seventeen, Hancock. Cut him some slack.” Nick interrupted. “I distinctly remember your idiocy when you were his age. This is minor compared to the shit you pulled.”

Hancock frowned. He took a long huff of Jet and relished in how the world seemed to slow down
momentarily. He could live in that moment, stretch it out until the high lasted all night, but Jet began having less and less of an effect on him.

Hancock sank heavily into the other open chair. The flickering candles sitting in on the countertop created a harsh shadow across the ghoul’s rough face. He pulled out the knife from his boot and pulled out a whetstone from his pocket. He ran the stone across the blade enjoying how the sharp edge caught the tissue of his ruined thumb.

“You gonna be careful with that?” Nick replied.

The ghoul didn’t even look at the synth. “Nicky, I’ve been playin’ with knives since I was a kid. Stop motherin’ me. This helps me think.”

Nick conceded and lit a cigarette for himself. But the uneasy silence between them nagged at Nick. He had to say something, anything, to try and ease their anxiety. “Look, I know we both feel pretty damn useless right now, but I think the best thing we can do is move on with our lives until Nora sends word to us.”

Hancock grunted, “You’re awfully optimistic.”

“Well its either optimism or soul crushing despair, so I guess I’ll choose the optimism.” Nick bit back.

Hancock shook his head and then stabbed the knife into the kitchen table so the blade stood up on its own accord. “You wanna know why I find optimism difficult?”

Nick knew that his question was rhetorical and waited patiently for the answer.

“Nora thinks she can just waltz back to the Institute like nothing’s happened and turn a place like that into a fuckin’ paradise. She doesn’t understand that when shit goes tits up — and it will — that she’ll be the one they blame, not the one who’s truly responsible. They don’t want a leader. They want a fall guy.”

Nick frowned. He could see where Hancock was coming from. “So you think this is a setup?”

Hancock nodded. “And when shit hits the fan, she ain’t gonna be able to handle it. Working as their Courser was the small times, baby. Covenant, Libertalia, hell, even Virgil’s attempted assassination were all small time missions and they fucked her up. She may seem fine now, but I know that kinda shit doesn’t go away on its own. And when this Brotherhood group begins nosing around a little more, they’re sure as fuck gonna be wanting their pound of flesh.”

Nick exhaled the smoke from his cigarette. He remembered his and Nora’s conversation about the Brotherhood of Steel. The woman who always wanted to look for the best in people was naive about the Brotherhood’s true nature. She thought Nick’s indictment of their group was also an indictment of her late husband and his military past, but it was really an indictment on the group’s bigoted and hateful policies. After all, he heard the rumors of their failure in the Capital Wasteland. For an organization as prolific as the Brotherhood, he was sure that failure wasn’t an outcome that they took lightly.

“You think the Brotherhood’s gonna go after the Institute.” Nick stated.

“Well they sure as fuck ain’t here trick-or-treating.” Hancock drawled.

Nick sighed. He knew the ghoul was right. “We gotta warn Nora somehow.”
Hancock nodded. “But how are we gonna do that when sunshine’s as stubborn as a brahmin?”

“It isn’t gonna come from us. At least not directly.” Nick replied. “When do you plan on leaving here?”

“As soon as we’re done talkin’.” Hancock replied. “I’ve been away from my town for too long, and I got to get back to work before some other asshole gets some smart idea of startin’ a rebellion.”

Nick nodded, rose from his seat, and rifled through the kitchen drawers until he found the phone book that Nora had used to write her notes. He tore off the thick cardboard cover and tore the piece into two halves. On both pieces he wrote a message in untidy scrawl and gave one to Hancock.

“Before you head to back, swing by the dead drop by the Fraternal Post. It’s the blue mailbox right by the old Pulowski Preservation shelter. Put this in the mail slot and then leave the mail slot open. That’s their sign that a dead drop is live.”

Hancock read the message and frowned. “You think they’re gonna know what the hell this means?”

“Desdemona will.” Nick replied. “She grew up in the Capital Wasteland after all.”

“No shit?” Hancock replied. The ghoul’s perception of the woman was turned on its head with those few spoken words.

“What are you gonna do?” Hancock replied. “You gonna head out too? We can always travel back together. At least I’d have you to talk to instead of that fuckin’ egghead. Maybe he’ll die on the way.”

Nick frowned, “You know Nora would be pissed to hear that. She did almost die saving his life.”

“Yeah, well I’m only lettin’ him tag along to apologize for almost knifin’ him in the street.” The ghoul mused and pulled his knife out of the table.

“Of course Hancock. Far be it for people to think you’ve suddenly found charity in your old age.” Nick quipped.

“We all can’t be as good as you, Nicky.” He smirked.

Nick rose to meet the ghoul and put his hand on his shoulder. “Travel safely.”

“You too, brother.” Hancock replied with a curt nod.

By the time the ghoul disappeared into the darkness, Nick sank back into the chair feeling exhausted. After an hour and another cigarette later, he finally found the courage to read the note that Nora had left him, and he read it over several times, and each time her words didn’t hurt any less, so he folded the piece of paper back up and put it back in his pocket.

His internal clock told him that it was a little after one o’clock at in the morning, and as he didn’t need sleep, he pulled out his pack of cigarettes and did what he did best: smoke and brood.

Nick thought about the first time that he saw Nora. When he saw her face through that window after she killed Dino, he thought that Ellie had sent some wide-eyed kid after him. But when she stepped through those doors, he remembered how his wry words sounded breathy and hollow in his voice. He doubted that she noticed; she was too distracted by his other physical attributes as many were when they saw him for the first time.
He didn’t know what he was expecting from her. If she wasn’t some naive kid, then some green-bind-the-gills mercenary was his second choice. When she vehemently denounced that title, he decided that she had to be something more. She had to be an angel. Her wings may have been broken, and when she was under the Institute’s thumb she was like their Angle of Vengeance, but her innate goodness was what drew him to her.

And it was her goodness now that drove her away from him. He understood it well. He, well Pre-War Nick, did the same thing to Jenny Lands all those years ago. Nora and Nick were protectors. They pushed people away because they were in danger by being with them. Nora did it when she ran from them outside of Goodneighbor, and she did it again when she punched Hancock at Libertalia and issued her warning to them.

Likewise, from what he pieced together from flashes of memory, Pre-War Nick broke off their engagement out of concern that Jenny would be hurt because of his involvement with the Winters case. But it didn’t matter. She was hurt anyway. Eddie Winters still abducted Jenny and murdered her. Nora’s protection had worked, whereas Pre-War Nick’s didn’t.

Synth Nick extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray on the kitchen table and got up to stretch his legs. He tidied up the living room, threw Hancock’s empty Jet canisters and their shared, spent alcohol bottles into the metal trash can outside, and put the used mugs in the sink.

There was one last thing that Nick needed to do. He glanced down the darkened hallway toward the one doorway that remained closed. He noticed how Nora eyed the door as she passed. It was as though the room behind the door held both her future and her past, and she was trying to avoid both of them.

Nick prayed that Nora would forgive his breach of privacy, but his detective sense was far too strong to let the room go unexplored. He gently turned the brass knob and opened the white wooden door that led to Shaun’s room.

Even in the darkness, Nick’s eyes could see everything as clear as day. The room held a faint smell of baby powder even after 200 years. Despite the room’s typical decay from the atomic bomb blast, the room was tidy and organized.

The blue wooden crib was the focal piece in the room. The toy rocket mobile that hung above it was undisturbed by his movement. A small faded rug sat underneath the crib with the colors blending together like a painter’s palette that was left out in the rain. On the shelf next to the crib were a collection of baby books, including one that read You’re Special!

On the top of the hip-high bookshelf was a green tackle box, a Blast Radius board game, and a silver framed picture of Nora, Nate, and Baby Shaun. Nate beamed happily from the picture as he held up infant Shaun to show the world this miracle of life. Nora smiled warmly, but her smile didn’t reach her eyes, and Nick saw the tinges of uncertainty and sadness on her beautiful face.

Besides the usual baby supplies, there was nothing else of importance in this room. There were no monsters hiding in the closet and no ghosts haunting the walls. The only thing that remained in this room of sentimental value were the memories that were locked away in these walls.

And Nick Valentine didn’t have the key.

Nora’s breath came out in a thick mist as she ran past the Red Rocket gas station turning right along a dirt road. She followed the large power pylons along a series of hills until she came upon a peculiar sight. A wooden structure that looked vaguely like a house was built up within a power
pylon’s frame. She heard the soft lowing of brahmin in their pens and she figured that this place must be safe enough. After all, she didn’t imagine that raiders would have the patience to keep brahmin.

She didn’t plan to stay long. By now, Nick and Hancock would’ve noticed her disappearance and she wanted to put more space between herself and Sanctuary Hills.

The wooden shack was precariously built up three stories high, but the candles that flickered in between the slats in the wood told her that most of the residents slept on the first floor. The land around the house was well cultivated. Even in the darkness, she could make out several rows of tato plants and she saw a small melon patch around the back.

A brahmin mooed as she passed the pen while the other head looked at her dolefully while chewing its cud. No matter how much time she spent in the wasteland, Nora would never get use to seeing two headed animals.

As she approached the wooden red door, she noticed a white chalk marking on the door frame. It looked like it was a crudely drawn house surrounded by lines pointing in eight directions. She remembered that Deacon explained that these marks were called railsigns and that they were used so Railroad members could communicate with each other.

Nora knocked on the door and took a step back to wait. Although the night was cool, the sky was cloudless for once and the amount of stars that painted through the sky was breathtaking.

“Go away, we ain’t entertaining visitors.” A voice called out from behind the door.

“I’m not here for any trouble.” Nora called back. “I’m traveling and I need directions. It’ll be five minutes and then I’ll be outta your hair.”

The door cracked open to reveal a clean-shaven, tanned face belonging to a man who looked to be in his mid forties. He didn’t open the door all the way, and Nora noticed that his hand was resting on a small pipe pistol that was in his belt holster.

“It’s awfully late to be travelin’.” He eyed her suspiciously.

“Don’t I know it.” She replied with a sympathetic grin. “I didn’t have much choice in the matter though. I escaped from a place called the Institute and I’m looking for a place to stay. You know of any?”

Nora figured that a little lying wasn’t going to hurt anyone, if this place was somehow affiliated with the Railroad, then perhaps they’d know how to get her in contact with Desdemona.

“Ah so you’re a synth.” The man replied. “Shoulda figured. I’ve never met no raider who wears clothes quite like that anyhow.”

He let out a nervous chuckle and opened the door a little wider. “Come on inside. Most of the house is asleep, but we can spare a bedroll while we figure out how to get ya moved onward.”

Nora balked, “No, I can’t sleep. I’m actually in a bit of trouble. I’m looking for my friends. We got split up after we were ambushed by feral ghouls. I ran until I couldn’t run anymore. Is there another safehouse nearby?”

The man thought for a moment, “Well, I suppose that the nearest one would be over at the ol’ food co op just south of here. Well truthfully, it’s south of here by at least a two hour walk. They call it Mercer Safehouse, but you ain’t gonna gonna be able to see very well when it’s blacker than pitch.
Nora wrinkled her nose at the thought of eating any meat-based substance from a can. “No thanks, I’ll manage if it’s only a two hour walk. Thank you for the directions.”

“The name’s Blake by the way.” He said opening the door a little wider. The heat from the multitudes of candles wafted out and beckoned Nora in like a siren’s song. “If you need anything, just come on back.”

“Great, thanks!” Nora replied with a too-cheery tone.

“I, uh, didn’t catch your name by the way.” Blake replied.

“That’s because I didn’t give one.” Nora responded. Then she lowered her voice, “No offense. I still don’t know who I can trust.”

Blake nodded knowingly. “‘Snot a problem. Any one of us friendly to synths will have a lantern lit outside our place.” He pointed to the one sitting on an empty oil drum on the deck. “That’s the sign that the place is a safe haven for your kind.”

Nora nodded and bid the man farewell. She disappeared off his porch and used the sliver moon to orient herself. Unfortunately, the journey southward took significantly longer on account of Nora getting lost twice. The first time she got lost, she was chased through the woods by a swarm of bloatflies. She came upon their roost and heard the deafening buzzing sounds and then felt their painful stingers as they shot at her arms, back, and legs. It was too dark for her to see to mount an attack, so Nora fled with her forearms protecting her face from the sharp branches and underbrush.

She emerged from the underbrush cut up and bruised, while pulling stingers out of the back of her legs, and saw that she was standing outside a deserted Drumlin Diner. Down the hill was the Starlight Drive In, and Nora knew that she could follow the railroad tracks west from there.

The second time she got lost, Nora didn’t realize that the railroad tracks actually branched out into an east-west line and a north-south line. The tracks for the east-west line were covered under rubble and dirt from a recent mudslide. Nora unknowingly walked the north-south line southwards until she came upon Greygarden and knew that she had gone too far. She sorely missed her PipBoy. But since it was still back at the Institute, Nora was forced to navigate without it. Nora decided to abandon the railroad tracks and simply follow the broken paved roads. If the place use to be a food co op, then reason stood to suggest that a road would lead right to it. As she walked all night, in the darkness, she began to realize that her plan was incredibly foolhardy.

All it would take would be for her to run across one roaming deathclaw or a swarm of feral ghouls and she’d be done for. It didn’t matter how well she fought, what tactics she learned from her work as a Courser, or what type of weapon she was carrying. One person, on their own, in the Commonwealth was a terrifying prospect.

The funny thing about fear is that once someone realizes they are afraid, the feeling compounds on itself and grows exponentially into terror. And Nora was terrified.

She took several deep breaths and maintained a steady fast walk along the broken road bed. She couldn’t give herself over to terror. Terrified people made mistakes. Mistakes caused people to die. And Nora, most certainly, didn’t want to die.

A collection of four Pulowski Preservation shelters sat on a large concrete slab beneath a broken
overpass. The charred remains of a skeleton sprawled out of one that was opened. Nora didn’t dare investigate the other three.

As the road pitched into a gradual incline, Nora began recreating a map in her head of the familiar locations. She could see the Boston skyline over her left shoulder, and she saw billboards advertising the refurbishment of the Galactic Zone in Nuka World off to her right.

Before the bombs, this entire area was underdeveloped; it was a quaint retreat for people who wanted to get away from the world and “front only the essential facts of life” as the billboard at Walden Pond said. Nora remembered going to Walden Pond while on a field trip, but she remembered nothing else about the place, and so Nora was left to stumble through the darkness hoping that she would stumble upon the location.

She blindly picked her way up the crumbling hillside and saw a collection of ruined houses on the other side of a dam. Here the land plummeted sharply into gullies and junk-filled river beds. Nora could see the dark figure of something moving around on the drained river bed below, but she couldn’t make out what it was. The bridge that should’ve spanned across the ravine had crumbled long ago, and Nora’s only choice was to either clamber down the dirt embankment, cross the river bed, and climb up the hillside, or to walk across the dry lake bed that was once Walden Pond and meet up with the road that came from the north. Nora couldn’t see any discernible movement coming from Walden Pond, and the lack of trees made the area easy to traverse, so she made the decision.

The cobalt sky was beginning to lighten to a dark navy blue and Nora picked her way carefully across the lake bed. Odd pieces of junk; cars, refrigerators, boat hulls, and tires, were embedded in the sand like stones. When she reached the center of the lake, Nora saw movement out of the corner of her eye and she stopped.

Two mongrel dogs trotted down the hillside towards her. Their emaciated bodies and their radiation burned skin made them look like the Hounds of Hell. Nora knew that she couldn’t run from them, so she pulled out the pistol that Daisy had given her, and waited for them to come to her.

The larger of the two sniffed the air and then locked eyes with Nora. It let out a loud, mournful howl and Nora crouched down to a fighting stance. The pistol in her left hand felt awkward, but her right hand was still out of commission from slugging Hancock in the face. But much to her dismay, the mongrel’s howls encouraged two more to join the fight.

All four dogs rushed at her, and for a moment, time seemed to slow as her adrenaline and will to live kicked in. Nora fired at the nearest one and it fell immediately. She aimed at the second one and the bullet pierced the animal in the skull and it tripped over its own feet and landed ten feet away in a twitching heap.

Nora’s adrenaline was fading quickly and her terror was beginning to make her second guess herself. The other two dogs were twenty feet way … fifteen .. ten … and Nora saw one leap up at her.

She dodged out of the way, but she didn’t see that a fifth dog — the alpha — had skirted around his pack and was coming at Nora from behind. She didn’t realize there was a fifth one until she felt its weight upon her back and crashed onto her knees.

They fell upon her like she was a radstag and Nora curled up into a fetal position to protect her vital spots. Her arms were laced around her neck and her chin was tucked into her knees. One dog bit her in the shoulder while another grabbed her pant leg and tried to jostle her into a more vulnerable
Nora fought and screamed. She kicked at the mongrels and felt a moment of satisfaction as she nailed one in the throat with her foot. She wasn’t going to go down like this, dammit. But her odds were looking worse as the seconds passed like minutes.

But then, the snarling suddenly stopped and the mongrels ran back up the hillside. Nora played dead in case they came back, but all she heard was the thudding of footsteps. Someone was running towards her. And then she felt two pairs of hands roll her onto her back.

“Holy — , it’s Nora.” One voice said.

“The dogs got her shoulder. We gotta bring her to Carrington.” Another voice said.

The voices sounded distorted to Nora’s ears and when she opened her eyes, the sky and their faces burred together like a kaleidoscope of colors.

“She’s conscious at least.” One of the voices said. She could hear that it belonged to a woman.

“C’mon Nora, stay with us.” Someone said. She recognized his voice but she couldn’t place where she remembered it.

The two of them hoisted Nora up to her feet and braced her as they walked with her back up the hillside. Her shoulder throbbed but she forced herself to focus on her footsteps: left, right, left, right, right … shit.

Nora tripped over her sluggish legs. If it wasn’t for the two people who were holding her up, she would’ve face planted into the dirt.

“We’re almost there, Nora.” The woman said. Her voice was low and smoky, and Nora made the connection.

“Desdemona?” She mumbled.

“Yep.”

Nora’s head lolled to her left, but she couldn’t quite make out the man who was holding her up.

“Who’s that?” She mumbled to Dez.

“Don’t worry about that now.” She admonished.

“Aww, c’mon, Dez.” He replied. “Are you really going to spoil this reunion for us?”

Desdemona huffed but said nothing and picked up the pace. Nora couldn’t quite keep up and so the two of them ended up half-dragging and half-carrying her into the Sunshine Tidings settlement.

Nora closed her eyes. The lights, the sounds, and the smells in the settlement all assaulted her brain. When she opened them again, she saw a Mister Handy float past. It’s hull was decorated in painted flowers and multi-colored peace signs, and it said “Far out, man!” as she passed by.

Yep, Nora decided. She had gone certifiably insane.

They brought her in to a large building that looked to be a mess hall of some kind. On one end of the building there was a medical partition and a bed tucked up against the wall. A familiar-looking man in a doctor’s coat looked at Nora and the duo and frowned.
“What the hell happened?” He asked.

“We picked up a stray.” Desdemona retorted and sat her upright on the bed. “She’s all cut up and has some pretty gnarly bites from a pack of mongrel dogs. The one on her shoulder is particularly bad.”

Carrington sighed and began rummaging around in a steamer trunk for the required medicine.

“Well at least its not a life or death situation.” He mumbled to himself, his voice was thick with sarcasm.

The heat and pain from her wound swept the fogginess away. When she got a good look at the man who helped her, the color from her already pale face drained away completely.

“Deacon!?”

“Alive and kicking, baby!” He grinned. He wore the same pompadour wig, dark sunglasses, threadbare clothes, and cocky attitude, and he couldn’t look any better.

Nora pawed through the air with her left hand until she caught ahold of Deacon’s sleeve and pulled him towards her. The hug she gave him was awkward on account of their height differences — she was sitting while he was standing — but he received it anyway and pulled up a chair next to her.

“Man, I didn’t realize that you cared about me like that.” Deacon replied. His dark eyebrows wagged suggestively, “It’s always in life or death situations that the people you love really seem to matter to you.”

“I thought that I had killed you.” Nora whispered emphatically. “When the courser shot you and Nick and took me, I thought you both had died. I thought that I had somehow gotten you killed.”

“Well, if it wasn’t for your synth boyfriend, I probably would’ve died. But, nothing’s gonna keep me down. Besides, I repaid my debt to Nick by saving you.”

“Wait, what?”

“You don’t remember?” Deacon pretended to be wounded, “And here I thought we had this connection between us. I picked you and some of your friends up outta the sewer by the Fraternal Post and gave you a ride to Goodneighbor.”

“That was you?” Nora felt both surprised and slightly vindicated in her suspicions.

“Yeah, and no offense, but you didn’t look too hot when I pulled you out of my wagon.” He replied. His tone temporarily turned serious.

“I wasn’t feeling too hot.” She replied vaguely. “I took too much Buffout while trying to escape the Institute.”

“You gotta be careful with that.” He remarked. “That shit’ll give you a heart attack.”

Deacon flashed her a dopy grin but the spy knew that Nora’s overdose on Buffout wasn’t accidental. After he handed Nora off to Hancock, he had no other choice but to run straight to Desdemona to give her the intel. He would’ve loved to stay and see if the ghoul needed a hand, but the hang up of faking your death is that you have to be committed to the program.

“So Nora.” Desdemona replied. “It seems you have escaped from the Institute’s clutches and have
lived to tell about it. I tried to see you while you were recovering, but your guard dogs were rather
erocious that day.”

“Yeah, well, there was a lot of shit going on that I was trying to process.” Nora replied.

Although she was feeling more confident in talking about what had happened, she didn’t feel any
less bitter.

“I understand.” Desdemona replied. And Nora saw that the woman’s expression held genuine
regret. “After, Carrington has patched you up and after you’ve gotten some rest, I’d like to speak
with you about what happened.”

Nora nodded and Desdemona’s lips twitched upwards into a small smile.

“Wonderful.” She replied.

When Desdemona left, and when Carrington was finished stitching up her shoulder and applying a
salve to her copious cuts and scrapes, Deacon and Nora talked until the sun rose up over the tree
line.

“So yep...” He grinned, recounting how the persona of Miguel the Trader came to fruition. “That
was my favorite disguise thus far. I got to see the Commonwealth, travel around, and hear all about
your exciting little adventures playing Courser.”

Nora’s face fell. “And you still saved my life after you heard about what I did?”

“Nora, you were undercover just as much as I was. And you know what they say, ‘What happens
when you’re undercover cannot be held against you in a court of law.’”

“That’s easy for you to say.” She mumbled. “You didn’t commit a mass murder while you were
undercover.”

“Hey, now. I’ll have you know that I executed a fair amount of radroaches in my travels. I was so
prolific in my killing of them that some people call me ‘the exterminator.’ I got paid to do it and
everything.” He grinned and Nora knew that he was trying to lighten the mood with his ridiculous
stories.

“You’re insane. You know this, right?” She replied.

“Oh, absolutely!” Deacon responded with a beaming smile. “You don’t live as long as I do without
being slightly insane.”

“So how did you know it was me out there being attacked by those rabid dogs?” Nora asked.
“Because, to be honest, I would’ve been eaten alive if it weren’t for you and Dez.”

“Well, we didn’t know it was you until we got there.” Deacon replied. “Believe it or not, The
Railroad can be altruistic sometimes. I guess you caught us on a day where we were feeling
generous and heroic and all that jazz.”

“I guess you were.” Nora replied quietly.

“By the way,” Deacon replied, “we really gotta stop meeting like this, you know, with us saving
your ass all the time.”

She chuckled, “Well I kinda took your one job by fucking up my job as courser. Without the synths
being sent topside, I’m guessing that the Railroad will have to start dabbling in the good samaritan acts to fulfill their hard on for justice.”

Deacon grinned. “I guess we will. But between you and me, I would still go out of my way to be altruistic, even if I didn’t get a hard on. That’s the kind of guy I am, ya know?”

Nora chuckled. Sleep was beginning to pull at her mind. “Thanks for saving me, Deacon. I would’ve been lost without you.”

On the deck of the Prydwen, a dozen men and women stood at parade rest before their leader.

Elder Maxson surveyed the small group of people that stood before him and knew that these young men and women were on their way to bringing a new era of peace into the world. After all of the heartache, destruction, and death that he saw back in the Capital Wasteland, Arthur Maxson had a plan to make the Commonwealth their new home.

As he spoke, he looked at each one of his soldiers and saw himself in their shoes. He remembered how everyone looked to Elder Lyons as the world went to literal hell around them.

He remembered the pain of losing not one, but two Elders, effectively crushing Lyon’s Pride beneath rubble and bones. But worse yet, he remembered how the distrust and infighting among them brought about the destruction of their home at the Citadel.

He remembered how the next five years of his life was marked with running and surviving. As Enclave soldiers hunted down Brotherhood squadrons by day, Arthur spent his entire waking moments training. As the last remaining link to their founder, he was put under a near 24 hour supervision. The pressure and expectations that fell upon his young shoulders would’ve broken a normal man, but Arthur rose to meet the challenge head on. And now he planned to do the same here in the Commonwealth.

He spoke, his voice holding authority and gravitas, “… Beneath the Commonwealth, there is a cancer known as the Institute. A malignant growth that needs to be cut before it infects the surface. They are experimenting with dangerous technology that could prove to be the world’s undoing for the second time in history. We all remember the Capital Wasteland, our home. We all remember those who died bravely for us, who died to give us enough time to leave that forsaken place. Their sacrifices must not be forgotten. We can repay their debt by stopping this Institute menace for good. We couldn’t stop the Enclave from destroying everything they touched, but we can save the Commonwealth from the same fate. These synth’s, or synthetic humanoids, are made from the very same kind of virus that has killed thousands back in D.C.”

Maxson’s intense gaze surveyed his new team with pride. These men and women possessed the grit and determination necessary to accept this challenge.

“Yes, this campaign will be costly and many lives will be lost. But in the end, we will be saving humankind from its worst enemy ... itself.”

“Ad victoriam!” He announced.

“Ad victoriam!” They all replied, their voices echoing through the hull of their ship as though it was the battle cry of the Prydwen herself.
Nora awoke and saw that her injured shoulder had been put into a temporary sling. The mongrel’s bite was healing thanks to the stimpack, but Carrington had also applied a bitter smelling salve to combat infection. Nonetheless, her skin pricked and itched beneath the gauze, and her vanity told her that it would probably leave a gnarly scar.

“Ah so you’re awake.” Carrington announced. He was sitting next to a terminal that was hooked up to a small generator. She saw that he was typing something that looked like an e-mail or a journal entry.

Nora cleared her throat and sat up in the bed. “Yeah, and thanks for patching me up.”

Carrington grunted in response but didn’t look at her. His lips were slightly pursed as though he was holding in a mouthful of insults that he didn’t want to let out.

Put off by his sullen behavior, Nora tried again. Her smile was warm and genuine, and there was a gentle note of self-depreciating humor in her voice. “Hey, I owe my life you to, Dr. Carrington. I just wish we didn’t keep meeting under these circumstances.”

“Believe me, you’re not the only one that wishes that. I think I’ve spent half our medical supplies saving you from your stupidity.” He snapped.

“Excuse me?” Nora jolted at his words. The bite in his tone was full of bitterness.

Although Carrington was never friendly, per se, he had a better bedside manner than Dr. Sun did. She could understand his frustration, but she never expected to be on the receiving end of such a scathing remark. Carrington didn’t take his eyes off the screen, but the words that spewed forth were wounding enough.

She tried to extend the olive branch again. “I’m sorry if I put anyone in danger. It was an accident, that’s all.”

“Just stop.” He snapped again. “The starry-eyed Vault Girl act wont work this time. Nearly half a year ago, you stumbled into our headquarters on death’s door from a poisoned knife wound, and now you stumble onto our doorstep yet again bleeding out from a dog bite. Both incidences could’ve been avoided if you used even a modicum of your brain. So forgive me for not fawning at your feet in excitement.”

“Look. I didn’t exactly plan to get attacked.” Nora countered indignantly. She couldn’t determine if she was more angry at what he was saying or at the fact that he didn’t have the decency to look her in the eye as he was chewing her out.

“Well you didn’t exactly use any common sense to avoid it.” He shot back.

Nora rose to her feet abruptly but sank back down on the bed when a wave of nausea overtook her. “You’re an asshole, you know that?”

Carrington responded, “I can live with being an asshole if that means I’m still living.”

“Jesus. What is your problem? Have I offended you in some way?” Nora asked.
“Your naiveté offends me. You don’t understand what’s at stake here. If we lose Des or Deacon, this entire operation is done for.” He snapped. Nora noticed that Carrington’s thin, pursed lips were trembling but he steeled himself and regained his composure.

“Look. I’m sorry. But remember, I sought you out. There’s a lot of things going on and I thought you guys could benefit from some intel.”

“Deacon’s done adequately in that field. We don’t need you.” He replied dismissively.

“You don’t need me? That’s bullshit and you know it. I was in the Institute for five months. I worked as their Courser and I saw how they operate. I have far more intel than Deacon could ever muster up in his dreams, and you’re just going to dismiss me?”

Carrington spun in his seat and faced Nora. “Don’t over-exaggerate your usefulness. If Blake Abernathy hadn’t radioed in that a doe-eyed girl was wandering the wastes at two in the morning claiming she was a synth, you’d be back at that lake bed with mongrel dogs eating off your corpse. And your knowledge of the Institute is hardly interesting anymore. Most of what you know is extraneous information. Our main goal was synth liberation, and you fucked that up. You could’ve helped Patriot move more and more synths to freedom, but instead, you couldn’t handle a mere five months in that place."

“I was forced to murder for them. I was imprisoned by them. I was raped.” Nora seethed.

“And you broke.” Carrington stated firmly. “And now Patriot is long gone. If he’s not dead, he’s in hiding because you blew his cover. I hope you feel good knowing that your escape probably cost dozens of synths their freedom.”

Nora stuttered and tripped over the insults that tried to spill out of her mouth. “I—I was just trying to survive down there. So fuck you.”

He rounded on her. His detached, calculated facade had broke. “You know nothing about survival. Desdemona and I crawled out of that Capital Wasteland hellhole to —“

“What’s going on in here?” A sharp voice commanded. Desdemona strolled in and Nora saw there was fire in her eyes.

“I was just telling Nora about the harsh truths of this world, and dispelling the myths that one person’s life matters more than the mission.” Carrington replied haughtily.

“Wow, who pissed in your sugar bombs this morning?” Deacon replied. The ever-present and nosy spy came around the corner and leaned against the wooden doorframe.

Des shook her head in exasperation. “Now’s not the time or the place Carrington. I need to talk with Nora alone.”

“Surely anything you need to say to her can be said in front of me. You made me your second-in-command, remember?” He replied stiffly.

“Yeah because Nora will feel so comfortable baring her soul in front of you.” Deacon drawled sarcastically. “You have the bedside manner and the social awareness of a deathclaw during mating season.”

“Just go.” Desdemona ordered. Carrington’s pointed stare and clenched jaw looked more suited on the face of a five year old boy than it did a forty-five year old man.
Carrington rose from his seat, switched off his terminal, and stalked out of the mess hall muttering under his breath.

“Deacon, go look after him.” She replied.

“Are you kidding me? I hate him as much as he hates me.” Deacon protested.

“Dammit Dee, I’m not asking you to be friends with him. We’re barely holding this together as it is. I’m asking you to look out for him. No matter how small our numbers get, we still have to look out for each other.” She snapped.

Deacon sighed and nodded. When he left the building, Desdemona took a seat on Carrington’s chair.

“I’d apologize for Carrington’s behavior, but he’s right about a couple points.”

Seeing Nora’s indignant glare, Desdemona held up a gloved hand to signal that she was going to explain herself momentarily.

“Carrington may have been too harsh about your actions in the Institute, but know that we don’t have all of the intel, and so he’s jumping to a lot of wrong conclusions. However, your poorly planned stunt last night could’ve ended in your death. You were being foolish, Nora.”

“I’m a grown woman and I can make whatever decisions that I want.” She replied petulantly.

Desdemona’s sardonic gaze made Nora shift uncomfortably and shame burned her cheeks.

“Alright.” Nora confessed, “You’re right. I didn’t plan this well at all.”

“Nora. I respect you too much to treat you like a child, but I cannot stress how crucial these next few weeks will be for us all. Like it or not, you are involved in events that will impact us all. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Desdemona replied. “So to start, why did you seek us out? I tried to talk with you in Goodneighbor, but your two guards were adamant that you weren’t talking to anyone.”

“I was … recovering.” She replied vaguely.

Desdemona nodded. “I’ve pieced together enough rumors and whisperings to get a general idea of what happened. But I still don’t have a clear answer on one thing. Who is Patriot?”

Nora sighed, “His name is Liam. He’s Dr. Binet’s son who is head of the Robotics division. He’s been shepherding synths topside for the past three years until he was discovered.”

“Do you know what happened to him?” Desdemona asked.

“I —“ Nora’s voice failed. What would happen if she revealed that Liam was not only alive but was currently living in her old town? She knew that the Railroad would try to make contact with him, but she also didn’t want to put him in more unnecessary trouble on account of her.

“Please, Nora. This is important.”

Nora sighed. “All I will say is that he’s still alive. He helped me escape from the Institute, but he was found out and was banished.”
“When was the last time that you saw him?”

Nora narrowed her eyes and jutted her chin out defiantly. She wasn’t going to reveal any more information. Frankly, there was nothing more that she could say that wouldn’t give him away.

“I’m not at liberty to say.” She replied in her best lawyer voice.

Desdemona sighed. She expected Nora to respond like this. “Fine. If you won’t tell me about Patriot, then what can you tell me about the Institute itself? I’ve received intel about your work as their Courser, and we’ve known enough about the Institute’s inner workings from Glory’s accounts, but I’d like to hear your take on it. Unlike Glory, you had unfettered access to the Institute.”

So Nora recounted her first few days in the Institute. She talked about each division and their leaders. She talked about her unexpected allegiance with Dr. Li and rescuing Virgil. Nora talked for a good hour until her voice faltered when it came to discuss that night with Ayo.”

“You don’t need to say anything Nora. I understand what happened.” She replied. There was a haunting look in her eyes. The enigmatic woman had her own secrets and demons to bury, and Nora felt the connection. She couldn’t be certain, nor could she pick out exactly how, but Nora knew that they were both kindred spirits tied together by the most appalling of experiences.

Desdemona cleared her throat and steeled her expression back to her normal stony countenance. She was back into interrogation mode.

“Nora, we connected with Piper Wright of Diamond City and informed her of a matter that concerns us all. We’ve had reports that a Courser has been looking for you. Our accounts of him have been vague, but we informed Ms. Wright so she could get the word out. Have you —“

Nora interrupted. “You’re talking about Nate aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Desdemona faltered. “How did you —“

“— He’s already made contact with me, several times in fact.”

“And … did he tell you what he wants? What the Institute wants?”

Nora exhaled heavily. Her breath came out in a fine visible mist and she desperately missed the cozy heat from the campfires back at Sanctuary.

“It’s complicated.” She said finally.

“I don’t doubt it.” The other woman agreed. “Word has it that he was created in your late husband’s likeness.”

“His likeness, his memories, his voice, his personality. If I hadn’t pulled my husband’s body out of the Vault myself, I would’ve thought that a biblical miracle had occurred.”

“But you know he’s not your husband, right?” Desdemona asked.

“Of course. But that doesn’t stop him from thinking that I’m his wife. Father created him to be my reward for being his Courser.”

“Ah yes, let’s go back to talking about Father. Is it true that he’s your son?”

“Yes.”
“I see. That certainly complicates matters.”

Nora gave her a wry smirk, “To complicate it further, he’s asked me to take over as Director when he dies.”

Desdemona wasn’t expecting a revelation like that, but to her credit, her astonishment was masked. The woman was silent for a moment, and Nora knew she was weighing each option in her mind.

“I need a smoke. You want one?”

Nora nodded, so she pulled out a silver tin filled to the brim with hand-rolled cigarettes and pulled out two, lit them both, and passed Nora one.

“So what are you going to do?” Desdemona asked after a long moment.

“I am going to accept.”

“Hm.” She replied. “You do realize that doing so would make you our enemy.”

There was no malice in the woman’s voice when she said that, only the neutral tone of a woman who concealed much beneath the surface.

“We don’t have to be enemies.” Nora insisted, perhaps a little too earnestly. “When I’m Director, I’ll be able to make positive changes to how the Institute operates. I’ll free the synth workers who are trapped there and I’ll start breaking the Institute’s isolationist policies.”

“And how do you think the Institute’s human citizens will react when you remove their slave labor?” Desdemona asked. “Slavers, even technologically advanced ones, won’t let go of their property without a fight.”

“What if I did it slowly? If people knew this was coming, then they can start making plans to compensate for the labor that’s lost. Besides not every synth may want to be freed right away. There are many who are afraid to stand up for themselves, and many more who are brainwashed into believing that their needs aren’t important. And I’ll need a group of people to help these synths acclimate to the wasteland. They’ll need protection from the bigots and narrow-minded people, and they’ll need someone to show them the ropes about how to survive.”

Desdemona considered what Nora was saying. “I suppose it would be a way for us to build up our numbers again.”

Nora nodded. “And the synths who are already out here would make great ambassadors for the new ones that are freed.”

“We’ll have time to hash out the details.” Desdemona replied. “Let me run this idea by Carrington and Deacon and see what they think. I’m assuming that the Institute will be sending someone to escort you back there.”

“Sort of.” Nora replied. She was being intentionally vague. “I’m expected to report back in four more days.”

“Four more days,” Desdemona was taken aback. “Forgive my indelicate question, but is your son expected to die soon?”

Nora frowned and bit her lip. Desdemona picked up on the cue and waved her hand at Nora. “Never mind. Forget I asked. Four days, huh? Well I’ll have Carrington radio to Glory, Drummer
Boy, and Tom. It will take them nearly half a day to get here from Goodneighbor, even hauling ass, but I think we’ll just make it.”

Nora nodded. She felt a little more secure in her plan now that she had connections to the outside. With the Railroad’s cooperation, she could start seeing how her vague plans and ideas were beginning to take root.

“Alright, hold up.” Hancock muttered to Virgil and led the man down a darkened alleyway.

The ghoul leaned out just enough to see the entrance to Goodneighbor. The neon sign that lit the way was partially broken and the letters flickered sporadically. His normally appointed Neighborhood Watch ghoul wasn’t at his post. In his stead, a young man dressed in raider’s clothing was looking out from his perch on the wall.

Hancock frowned and his palms tingled. He had a bad feeling about this.

“What’s wrong?” Virgil asked. To his credit, the man had kept his complaining and talking to a minimum during their journey back to Boston. He wasn’t exactly a seasoned fighter but his presence didn’t annoy Hancock as much as he thought it would.

“There’s some new guy on guard detail, and he ain’t one of mine.” He whispered. “This whole thing smells like a coup, but I don’t wanna get you caught up in this. You’re gonna stay here until I come and get ya.”

“You want me to stay in this alleyway until you come back?” Virgil asked. “Do you really hate me that much that you’d let me get mauled to death by some wasteland creature?”

Hancock rolled his eyes, “Well, I don’t hate you enough to make you come with me. If there’s a coup happening, you can bet your ass they’ll start shooting at the new guy first in case they think you’re some bad ass mercenary who’s hear to rub ‘em all out.” He chuckled darkly. “Besides, you’re built and you’d make an easy target to shoot at. So make your choice. Stay here and not get shot and probably not get eaten, or come with and definitely get shot.”

Virgil frowned at the choice. “Fine. You made your point.”

“Wonderful.” He remarked dryly. “If you hear gunfire and screaming, wait until it all dies down before you come investigating. With any luck, I won’t be one of the bodies you’re burying.”

Before Virgil could protest or provide him words of encouragement, Hancock was walking towards the Goodneighbor doors with the swagger and confidence of a man twice his size.

“S-stop right there.” The boy ordered. His voice was authoritative, but he was shaking like a leaf. When Hancock came closer, he could see that the kid wasn’t even old enough to grow facial hair.

“Look kid. You don’t know who you’re talkin’ too. So why don’t you just shut up and let me in.” He drawled, sounding bored.

The kid trained his combat rifle on Hancock. The gun was too large for the kid’s emaciated frame. Even if he did manage to fire a shot off, he’d fall onto his ass from the recoil.

“Don’t do anything stupid, kid.” Hancock growled and upholstered his own combat shotgun.

“Then fuck off and don’t come back.” He sneered. “This place has a strict no synth policy.”
Hancock cocked his bare eyebrow at the boy and flashed him a predatory grin. He almost regretted his next move, almost.

He grabbed a knife that was hiding in his sleeve and threw it overhand at the kid. Since he was holding his gun in his right hand, the kid never anticipated that Hancock would throw a knife ambidextrously with his left. Hancock threw the knife with the same ease and practiced aim that he had from playing darts down in the Third Rail. Whether it came to darts, or throwing knives, Hancock was unbeatable.

Nevertheless, he didn’t want a bullseye. Not yet, at least. He didn’t want to kill the kid, but he did want to rough him up a little.

The blade flew through the air, it’s silver blade glinted briefly in the sunlight before flying past the kid’s bare shoulder. His blade managed to nick the skin at the juncture of his neck and shoulder and blood poured from the wound. The cut wasn’t deep enough to cause serious damage, but it was enough to distract the kid enough for him to drop his gun with a squeal that sounded like a stuck pig.

He caught the combat rifle before it fell to the ground and ejected the cartridges before tossing the gun into the dirt. The ammo wasn’t going to do him any good, but at least he could avoid anyone sneaking up behind him with a loaded weapon.

With a stern and focused expression, Hancock kicked open the metal door that led to his shining city and strolled into the marketplace with his own gun drawn.

The town fell silent and Hancock’s dark eyes scanned the cobblestone market square. It seemed that it was business as usual; a couple citizens were playing chess at a table outside of Daisy’s store, Lucas Simms was in town and he set up his shop outside KL-E-O’s storefront, and citizens were either milling about in their typical groups or were passed out in the alleyways and darkened corners. But there was one thing that was out of the ordinary, and that thing was Bobbi No-Nose standing on his balcony looking him in the eye with a satisfied smile.

“Well, well, well. Welcome home, Johnny.” She called out in a sickening sing-song voice. “Didja have fun with your synth whore?”

Hancock gritted his teeth and adjusted his grip on his shotgun. Apparently Fahrenheit’s lesson in respect wasn’t strong enough, he thought.

“Are ya lost Bobbi?” He spat back. “I don’t recall ever inviting you up to my office. Didn’t Fahrenheit tell ya that I was out on business?”

She scoffed, “If fuckin’ that synth bitch of yours is what you call business, then yeah, she told me. Too bad that she’s indisposed at the moment.”

“What the fuck did you do with her?” Hancock growled. It was unheard of for someone to get the drop on Fahrenheit and not walk away riddled full of bullet holes, so he assumed that other nefarious means were used to subdue the capable woman.

“She’s fine. She’s just a bit tied up right now. But you, Hancock, you have crimes of your own to account for.”

Bobbi snapped her fingers and figures, both men and ghouls, stepped out of the shadows and trained their tommy guns on Hancock. His eyes flickered across their faces memorizing their features and descriptions in near photographic detail. If he wasn’t going to make it out of this alive,
then he wanted to remember the faces of the men who had the gall to take him out. But if he did survive, he planned to make each and every one of them pay.

“How much did you have to pay these men to die for you?” He asked, “Because I can promise them double your rate for them to walk away now.”

Bobbi’s cackle was harsh, “They ain’t gonna do that.”

“Really? Because that one over there,” Hancock indicated to an ashen-faced ghoul wearing a navy blue pinstriped suit, “finked on Vic when I came to town, and now he’s finked on me. What’s to say he wont do it to you too?”

The ghoul seemed to whither beneath Bobbi’s scrutinizing gaze but then turned her attention back to Hancock.

“Maybe because we all know the truth. That you’re not really Hancock. That you haven’t been Hancock in a long time, and once my guys kill you, they’re gonna crack open that skull and take a look-see inside. Who knows, maybe we’ll find sparks and wires instead instead of a drug addled brain.”

“And if you don’t find anything, what then?” Hancock could barely get the words out. He was going to rip this woman limb from limb.

Bobbi shrugged, “Then I guess we’ll have to use your body for something else. I was thinking that you’d make a good decoration. Ya know? What if we hang you up on the balcony in your silly little costume?”

The group of men chuckled and Hancock’s fingers twitched. His right hand rested outside the trigger of his combat shotgun while his left hand ghosted over the pocket that held a collection of small throwing knives. He counted quickly. Eight. There were eight men on Bobbi’s side and only one of him. He could maybe take two or three out before they started shooting, but the odds weren’t looking in his favor.

“You know how this is gonna end Bobbi.” Hancock called out. “Even if your men do manage to gun me down, you’re gonna be responsible for the care and protection of these citizens here. Are you ready for that?”

She scoffed, “I ain’t gonna be responsible for nothin’. When I kill your sorry ass, I’m renaming this shithole town into something more prestigious, and I’ll change the title of Mayor as well. I was thinking about something closer to ‘supreme ruler. If people don’t like it, well fuck ‘em.’”

Hancock had many hidden talents, but one of his more useful ones was having the ability to read a room and glean the overall tone and temperament of the people. Looking around, he could see that Bobbi’s pro-authority comment had rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. All he had to do was keep Bobbi talking long enough for him to gather a group of followers to jump to his aid.

Hancock rasped. “And how do you think these good citizens are gonna like being ruled over by a single authority? That just ain’t our style here, sister. You know that.”

“They’ll learn to like it when I start decorating the street with the bodies of those who defy me.” She snarled.

Hancock saw some of the crowd shift uneasily. Tensions were bubbling and he knew he had to act. Daisy caught his eye from across the courtyard. She quietly pulled out her own gun from beneath a countertop and nodded to him. His eyes darted to his right and he saw that Ham casually brushed
back his unbuttoned suit jacket to reveal his pistol. He also knew that KL-E-O would jump into the fray as a result of her programming and her perverse thirst for blood, so he figured that four against eight were slightly better odds.

“Or ya can stand down now and save yourself the trouble.” Hancock suggested.

Bobbi cackled, “Fuck No. And I’m done wastin’ my breath on you. People have always fawned at your feet to either lick your boots or suck your cock, and I ain’t doin’ either. I’m tired of you and I’m tired of this fuckin’ conversation. Boys. Kill him.”

Hancock felt his heart plummet out of his chest when he heard the orders, but his brain flipped into survival mode. There was a momentary pause as the gunmen considered whether they wanted to obey the order or not. After all, these ghouls and men weren’t soldiers, they were hired thugs. Maybe they would decide that killing him was above their pay grade. Nevertheless, the brief pause gave Hancock enough time to spring into action.

He could hear the roar of the people around him but their voices were indistinct. Ham drew his pistol and an explosion of sparks jumped out from Daisy’s shotgun. As though someone else was controlling his movements, Hancock raised his own shotgun and ran into the group. A bestial scream ripped from his lips, but he heard nothing but the pounding of his heartbeat.

Three of the thugs rose to fire their guns but Hancock’s shotgun cut a hole into one’s chest while the other slammed into his left shoulder as he came barreling past them. He spun around on his heels to face the group from the back and shot another thug in the head.

The one farthest from Hancock and closest to the State House entrance jostled momentarily and then looked dumbly at his white dress shirt. Red blood began to seep out of a wound in his chest and his tommy gun clattered as it hit the cobblestone ground. Before Hancock could fully register how the ghoul died, he saw the swift movements of a man leaping from rooftop to rooftop around the marketplace with a sniper rifle slung across his back.

Thank fucking God for MacCready, he thought.

As predicted, KL-E-O jumped into the fray and began bludgeoning a mobster with her metallic, club-like hands. Her red laser charged up briefly and then discharged into the man’s body. The smell of burning skin and human hair cut through the town square and the man’s anguished screams rose above the riotous fighting from the crowd.

Ham took cover behind a large mail box that was sitting at the entrance to The Third Rail. His own pistol fired rapidly and in short, controlled bursts. Although it was a small weapon, it was certainly capable in providing enough distraction for the time being. Which meant the only person left that was currently in harms way was Daisy.

Before he could turn towards her store, Hancock felt several several small explosions rip through his body and then he heard the crack of a high caliber rifle. He turned to see one of them holding a smoking tommy gun, but before Hancock could retaliate, a trickle of blood wept down the thug’s face. He had been shot in the head just above his left eye. He swayed on his feet and then fell face down into the dirt at Hancock’s feet.

Hancock blinked dumbly and adjusted his shotgun so it took weight off his throbbing side. But he didn’t take a step forward before he felt someone jerk sharply on the back of his jacket.

“Dammit, John, you’ve been hit. Get in here.” Daisy rasped.
The small act of her jerking on his clothing spread tendrils of pain through four points on his body. Each breath that he drew bordered on excruciating and he was beginning to feel numb in his left arm.

“Let me go Daisy. I need to go back out there.” He growled.

“You ain’t going anywhere until I patch you up well enough so you make it to that bitch. It ain’t gonna do us any good if you bleed out on the sidewalk.” She seethed and pulled him into her house, locked the door, and pushed Hancock into a chair.

There, on her couch, were John Hancock’s clothes. He reached out to the garments with trembling hands. No amount of chems could create the same ease and sense of purpose that flowed through his veins.

“Wouldja just wait until I patch the bullet holes.” She chided. The ghoul woman straddled his lap, it was a move that was more domineering than sensual, and it proved necessary as Hancock squirmed and whined beneath her poking and prodding.

“What the fuck!” Hancock snarled. Daisy was using long needle-nosed pliers to remove the bullet fragments from the gunshot wounds. Two of them were peppered pretty close together in his shoulder, but the rest peppered his side and his upper thigh.

“I ain’t takin’ your pants off, so you’ll have to get the one in your leg out on your own.” Daisy replied. She uncapped two stimpacks and injected them the wounds that were in his shoulder.

“Here, take these.”

Daisy passed Hancock an assortment of pills and some purified water. His brain was still doing flip flops in his skull from the pain that throbbed across the left side of his body so he couldn’t identify the types of pills they were, but he knew that Daisy wouldn’t ever intentionally cause him harm.

“You tryin’ to take advantage of me?” He grinned and tipped the pills into his mouth and chased them down with water.

Daisy grinned back. “I just wanna make sure you have all the inspiration you need — chemical or otherwise — to kill that fuckin’ cunt.”

Hancock’s heart rate nearly doubled, but his ghoul physiology compensated by pumping more and more blood through his veins. The strength in his limbs returned and he rose shakily and shirked off the grey dress jacket and pulled on the red, ruffled sleeved armor and tied the flag belt at his waist as though he was cinching on a scabbard or flintlock pistol.

His mottled hand grabbed the tricorn hat and placed it on top of his bald head and he took a steady breath.

“Here we go.” He muttered.

When he stepped back out into the town square, fighting died down a little but didn’t completely stop. Most of Bobbi’s thugs were bleeding out in the street, and the two who escaped most of the bloodbath were being beaten senseless with baseball bats by two Goodneighbor residents.

Hancock had half the mind to stop them but thought better of it. These people needed an outlet, even if the outlet was bloody and violent. Besides, the thugs knew what they were getting themselves into when they agreed to work for Bobbi. Hancock straightened his posture and walked towards the white washed door of the Old State House and through the door open.
He slowly climbed the wooden spiral staircase. The pain in his leg had dulled to a raw ache. He tried to listen for anyone creeping above him. With a building as old as this, stealth and subterfuge was nigh impossible — not that it was Hancock’s style anyhow.

“Oh Bobbi.” he called out, and he heard footsteps scurry above him. He would’ve been worried about her escaping, but unless she jumped from the balcony, Bobbi had no way out of his office.

“You can’t run, Bobbi.” The predatory glee in his voice skipped through the hallways. The footsteps above him stopped and Hancock knew that he had her where he wanted her.

The door to his office was cracked open, but there was blood on the wall where Fahrenheit normally stood. The mere sight of Fahrenheit’s struggle made his him enraged. He hoped that his second-in-command was merely incapacitated and not actually dead.

“Where’s Fahrenheit, Bobbi?” He growled.

“Why don’t you come in and find out?” She challenged.

“Now, Bobbi. Why don’t you face me like a woman instead o’ cowering in my office like an animal. Your game is up.”

Bobbi cackled but her voice sounded too far away. Was she running? The only exit out of his office was through the double doors that led to the balcony. He knew the jump from the balcony wouldn’t kill her, so he had to act.

Hancock kicked open the door and stormed into the office with his gun drawn. The room was dark, but he could make out the evidence that Bobbi had moved in as soon as he left with Nora.

Assorted syringes of Psycho and DayTripper were lying around his desk. The safe that was in the corner which held a sizable amount of caps, gold, and sentimental trinkets was cracked open. He didn’t need to check it to know that it was empty.

“John…” He heard a faint wheeze.

Hancock saw a figure in the far left corner of the room and he moved a couple of steps towards it. It was Fahrenheit. It had to be, he thought.

Thick, tan wrists were bound together and attached to a large hook that had been fastened to the wooden ceiling slats and the body’s feet were barely skimming the ground. A bucket was rolling on its side and Hancock realized that someone had kicked it out from underneath her. It was a torture technique that he was familiar with. Soon Fahrenheit’s shoulders would become dislocated if she was left to dangle any longer.

“Shit, Fahr—”

“No, John.” She wheezed. She was sporting a black eye and a split lip. Blood stained her chin and contrasted against her sallow skin.

He grabbed the metal bucket and turned it upside down. There was no way in Hell that he could lift the six foot tall beastly woman high enough to get her onto the bucket, but she managed to clamber back onto the bucket on her own.

She coughed and the rattle in her chest told Hancock that she probably had broken ribs. “Dammit you asshole, it’s a fucking trap.”
A gunshot rang out from behind him and Fahrenheit jostled and sank against Hancock’s body. Thick dark red blood bloomed out from her stomach and Hancock almost forgot to breathe.

He spun around and saw Bobbi’s smug smirk; although she was enshrouded in the shadows, Hancock could still make out her crooked and missing teeth. She cocked back her smoking gun and rose her aim so that the barrel was aiming between his eyes.

“Your bodyguard was hard to break. It’s a shame I had to do that. But a dog that loyal could never be useful to me.”

Something snapped in Hancock. He dropped his gun. Shooting the cunt would be too generous, he thought. No, he was going to end Bobbi with his bare hands. He ignored the protests from his wounds and rushed towards the ghoul woman with his arms outstretched and his fingers curled into claws.

He didn’t hear the shot, nor did he feel the pain, but the wetness that flooded down his face told him that something was terribly wrong.

Bobbi’s gleeful, insane smile turned into snarled fury as his mottled hands closed around her skinny neck and crushed it. All he had to do was flick his wrists, feel the cracking beneath his palm, and let the ghoul’s dead weight drop to the floor.

He staggered back. He had to cut Fahrenheit down. The woman was strong. She could survive a gunshot wound to the gut.

The room swam in front of Hancock’s eyes. Colors swirled and bled together like fresh portrait that had been left out in the rain. His concern for Fahrenheit trickled out of his mind like someone had pulled a plug on his brain. Something far more important took control of his conscious thoughts.

He walked towards the double doors that led to his balcony. He was the Mayor, dammit. He had to give a speech. Bobbi was dead, and he was back. It would be a rousing speech full of hope, camaraderie, and reassurance that nobody could take him down. Goodneighbor would forever be his town, and those assholes, those drug addicts were his people.

But Hancock never made it to the doors.
Stay Alive

Chapter Notes

I cranked this chapter out quickly because I felt badly leaving everyone on a cliffhanger like that when I knew that I wasn’t going to be updating as frequently. So here’s the sort-of resolution. And I’ll be quiet for a bit now that my work load is picking up. I’ll be absent for about a month as I take care of stuff IRL. Thank you to everyone for your support, constructive feedback, and reviews. You all rock.

Chapter 18 - Stay Alive

“What did you give him?” Dr. Amari urgently asked Daisy. The ghoul’s navy blue dress was stained dark with blood and she was trembling.

After Hancock left her house, Daisy knew that Bobbi was hell bent on killing the him. Although usurping Hancock’s position was the cherry on the proverbial asshole-tyrant sundae, Bobbi had a personal vendetta to settle that went beyond political ambition, and that made her dangerous to everyone in Goodneighbor. So Daisy decided to watch Hancock’s back. She skirted around to the back entrance to the Old State House where she encountered Ham who had a similar idea to offer aid to his fearless leader.

She knew the idiot wouldn’t accept help outright -- he was too damn prideful -- but she also knew how serious Bobbi was about making Hancock pay. She and Ham went in thinking they’d provide some extra manpower and they left carrying Hancock’s body out on a makeshift stretcher. Thankfully Hancock was petite and subsisted more on chems and cigarettes rather than food, because they made it to Amari in record time. When they got there, the good doctor was already well prepared for a battle and had the other half of her office prepped as a makeshift ICU.

“Daisy, you gotta answer me.” Dr. Amari snapped. She began throwing an assortment of sterilized surgical equipment onto an aluminum tray. From the damage, it was clear that she was dealing with a gunshot wound to the head. Typically, wounds like this meant that the victim was dead upon arrival, but remarkably Hancock was still breathing, so she held onto a sliver of hope that he could hang in there. He was one of the most stubborn people that she’s ever met, so she could only hope that his stubbornness would transfer to a will to live.

“He took two Buffout, two mentats; both berry flavored, and a couple capsules of Tranexamic acid. It’s not as good as the Pre-War shit that I use to take, but I made it to work just the same.” Daisy rattled off the information quickly.

“You cooked Tranexamic acid? What is that? A stimulant?” The doctor snapped. She knelt down next to Hancock who was lying on the floor of her office with a wad of his bedsheets duct taped to his head to act as a makeshift tourniquet. She unbuttoning his frock coat. His bare chest showed signs of fresh, but healing bullet wounds, and the doctor shook her head in disbelief.

Daisy was about to answer her, but Virgil cleared his throat and stepped farther into the room. He had ignored Hancock’s explicit directions to stay behind. He partly did it to spite the ghoul, but he also did it because he heard the deep grumbling voices of a Super Mutant scout heading his way. If he was given a choice between being shot at by mobsters or being eviscerated by Super Mutants,
he’d take the gunshot every single time.

“Tranexamic acid a blood clotting agent found in Pre-War pain medication. It’s often used for abnormally heavy bleeding during a woman’s menstrual cycle.”

“I gave him that medication to slow the bleeding from the various gunshot wounds he received from Bobbi’s men. I never anticipated that he’d get shot in the fucking head.” Daisy’s normally secure and strong voice took on a shrill ending. John was her friend. He was like a brother to her. And now he was on death’s door.

Dr. Amari looked at the intruder pointedly, “I’d ask who you are, but we don’t have time for introductions. Help me put him on the table.” She didn’t know this man from Adam, but he had a pulse and was obedient enough to take orders from her, so he’d do for now. Besides, his knowledge of Pre-War chems didn’t hurt either.

Virgil scooped the ghoul up and placed him on the hospital gurney like he was a rag doll and then grabbed a pair of sterilized rubber surgical gloves and snapped them up to his elbows. He also grabbed a blood pressure cuff and a stethoscope and began monitoring the ghoul’s failing vitals. His movements were practiced, like a doctor’s, and he began grabbing an assortment of sedatives, pain relief medications, and stimpacks from Amari’s supply cabinet.

“You have medical training?” Amari asked in disbelief.

“Yes ma’am.” He replied quickly. “We don’t have time to get into my credentials, but I can assure you that I’ve worked in the medical field for nearly twenty five years. If I were to offer my medical opinion, I’d say that he’s going to need a blood transfusion. Even with the blood coagulant, he’s lost too much as it is. I’ve been told you’re the brain doc, so why don’t you deal with the gaping head wound while I get him started with some blood and fluids.”

Dr. Amari pursed her lips. She didn’t really appreciate being ordered around in her own laboratory, but she also desperately needed the extra competent hands.

Then she turned to the trembling ghoul, “Daisy, go back upstairs and help care for any of the injured. We’ll use the lower floor of the State House to run triage. If Fahrenheit is up to it, get her to help.”

“Fahrenheit is dead.” Daisy rasped.

Dr. Amari’s jaw clenched and she compartmentalized the onslaught of emotions that bombarded her mind. She knew that Hancock would be besides himself with anger and grief if he found out. She wasn’t looking forward to breaking that news to him, but first, she had to make sure he survived so he could hear the news.

“Then get anyone who is able and willing to help you. If they aren’t at risk of dying in the next hour or so, then hand them some stims and move on. There’s some Med-X and stimpacks in that cabinet over there. Just take what you need.”

Daisy nodded and took several stocked first aid kits with her as she left the doctors to their work.

“His heart rate is inconsistent. It’s probably from the combination of the chems he’s coming off of and the physical trauma he’s experienced. He’s at risk of going into shock if we don’t get him stabilized soon.” Virgil rattled off factually and professionally.

Dr. Amari pulled a surgical mask over her face and pulled the surgical cart over to Hancock’s head. Virgil was inserting a needle into the ghoul’s forearm. A bag of blood was hanging from a nearby
IV pole.

“C’mon John. Stay with us,” Dr. Amari murmured. She quickly cut the duct tape loose and pulled an entire roll of surgical gauze and cotton swabs to her side. She steeled herself against the carnage that she was about to see and pushed all other thoughts from her mind.

She switched on the surgical light and slowly peeled back the blood soaked bedsheets. Hancock mumbled incoherently and his eyelids flickered open. Both were good signs, remarkable signs even, that he hadn’t fallen into a coma.

“John, you’re okay. It’s Dr. Amari. I’m going to patch you up. Just stay still. Can you tell me what happened?” She spoke low and soothingly but it did little for the ghoul.

“... Nora.” He wheezed out.

“Shhhh, just listen to my voice. Everything is going to be fine” Dr. Amari soothed. He couldn’t work himself up into a frenzy, she thought. He needed to remain as calm as possible.

She examined the gunshot wound. Thankfully most of his skull was still intact. The bullet came through cleanly and the exit wound was small. The lack gunpowder residue around the entrance wound (which was three inches above his right eye) meant the bullet wasn’t an explosive round, and from what she knew about Bobbi and her M.O., she assumed the weapon she used was small enough to conceal. Therefore, a small caliber pistol was the likely culprit, she reasoned.

“Nora?” Hancock’s croaked.

“Talk to me John.” She commanded. If he was talking, then that meant she could ask him questions to determine what part of his brain suffered damage from the bullet wound. “Do you know what day it is?”

But as he drew further into consciousness, the pain from his wounds became too much. He panted and writhed, but Virgil’s strong arms held him down so he didn’t rip out the IV in his arm.

“FUCK! I -- It f-f-uckin’ hurts.” He whimpered.

“I know, John.” Dr. Amari replied soothingly. “We’ll get you some Med-X soon. But I need to ask you some questions. I’m sorry, but it’s important. Can you see us? Can you see where you’re at?”

“Y-yes.” He growled and writhed some more.

“Is it in color? Can you see normally?” Dr. Amari asked.

“W-wh-wh-” He tried to formulate his question but the words died on his lips as the pain stole the breath from his lungs

“John. I need to know to determine if you’ve suffered brain damage. You’ve been shot in the head.”

Hancock’s eyes fluttered closed and his hands clenched into fists. “N-Nora!”

“John, is Nora here?” Amari asked, suddenly afraid that the woman was still caught up in the fighting out there.

Virgil shook his head, “She didn’t leave Sanctuary with us. She left on her own in the middle of the night. It was just me traveling with him.”
Hancock shuddered and his chest heaved. Thin tears dripped down his bloody cheeks.

“John, I know it hurts. Just hang in there.”

For being a neuroscientist, Dr. Amari felt remarkably useless. She had no way of determining Hancock’s current mental faculties without putting him through unnecessary stress by hooking him up to a memory lounger, but even that wasn’t guaranteed to work. She specialized in operating on synthetic minds, not humans, and even then, her success rate wasn’t exactly sterling.

“What month is it?”

The ghoul opened his eyes again, and his expression gradually changed as though someone had slid a dimmer on a light switch. Although his body still twitched from the excruciating pain, his eyes lost all sense of familiarity; it was as though he was an infant again observing the world around him for the first time.

“March?” He suggested weakly.

“No, not quite.” She replied patiently. “Do you know how old you are?”

She administered a stimpack above the entry wound. The stimpack would reduce his risk of bleeding out, but it wouldn’t close the wound completely. She’d have to manually stitch his wounds closed.

“I — I don’t know.” Hancock replied. His voice sounded unsure and small, like he was a child answering a question in class but wasn’t sure of the answer. Then he slurred, “God damn my mom’s gonna be pissed that I’ve been fighting again.”

“This is a waste of time. We need to sedate him.” Virgil huffed. “He’s strung out on chems and he’s riddled with injuries. He could go into cardiac arrest from the stress.”

“We can’t until I can determine what parts of his brain have been damaged.” She insisted.

“Then run a fucking CAT scan on him while he’s sedated.” Virgil bristled.

“Do I look like I have a CAT scan machine hiding around here?” Amari snapped back.

Amari turned back to the ghoul. “John. Do you know who I am?”

“Amari?” He rasped out but sounding uncertain.

“Good.” She replied and then she pointed to Virgil. “And do you know who that is?”

“No.” He rasped and the fear in his voice was unmistakable.

“Hm. Minor amnesia, maybe.” Amari said aloud. “John, you said that your mom would be upset with you. What year is it?”

He groaned and tried to reach up and touch the wound with his hand, but Dr. Amari caught his rough hand and gently set it on the table. “C’mon John. Answer me, please. What year is it?”

“2260. Mom’s birthday is next week.” He rasped weakly.

Dr. Amari sighed. He was definitely exhibiting signs of amnesia. Then she looked at Virgil and nodded towards the table that he was standing nearby. “I need you to hand me those forceps so I can hold the skin together to stitch up the exit wound. Oh shit —”
“Dammit, he’s going into a seizure.” Virgil growled.

As she spoke, Hancock’s eyes rolled back in his head. His jaw clenched shut and he jostled violently on the table. His legs flailed out and he kicked over the IV pole which ripped the blood transfusion tubing and the IV from his arm.

The man strapped Hancock’s limbs to the gurney with leather belts while Dr. Amari held his head steady and put pressure on the wound with some fresh gauze.

Virgil administered the sedative into the ghoul’s other arm and then snatched the IV pole from the ground. He grabbed a fresh blood bag from the stainless steel countertop and re-inserted the IV into the ghoul’s arm. He took note of the faint pockmarked scars on his inner arms and noticed the angry purple bruise from the ghoul’s earlier, accidental encounter with Psycho. The poor bastard’s arms were going to look like pincushions soon, he thought.

When Hancock’s body stopped seizing, Virgil went back to monitoring his vitals.

“John? Can you talk to me again?” Dr. Amari asked. She firmly slapped his bloody cheek a few times but the ghoul was unresponsive.

“His heart is rapid, I’m estimating about 110 beats per minute and his blood pressure is low. He’s going into shock.”

“Shit.” Dr. Amari cursed. She grabbed a large handful of thick gauze and applied pressure to the wound.

Virgil grabbed faded yellow throw pillows from a couch that was tucked in the corner of the room and placed them beneath Hancock’s feet.

“Go ahead and administer him a dose of Med-X for now. I’m not going to get anything else from him without risking his life.” Dr. Amari replied with resignation.

Virgil grabbed the small purple syringe and added it to his IV. He then went around to the head of the table and helped Amari stitch closed the exit wound in the back of Hancock’s head. Her hands worked quickly, but he noticed that her hands were trembling as she stitched the wound closed. Once they were satisfied that Hancock wasn’t going to bleed out on the operating table, they began cleaning his body of the blood, dirt, and grime he had accumulated.

Dr. Amari pulled two blankets from a nearby gurney and pulled his red frock coat all the way off his body. The poor thing was bloodstained but she knew that Hancock would never forgive her if she destroyed it, so she dropped the ruined garment into the clothes hamper to wash.

She covered his bare chest with the blankets and then began unbuttoning his pants. She slipped his slacks over his hips and down his legs. Virgil took over and helped remove the offending garment and readjusted the blanket so it covered the ghoul’s modesty.

He cleared his throat and checked the ghoul’s vitals once more. “His blood pressure has risen and his heart rate has slowed to normal parameters. However, he does have a fresh gunshot wound on his outer thigh. I’d suggest that you go ahead and patch it without the use of stims, at least for now; he’s at his limit for chems of all types. I’m worried that one more stimpack would react negatively with the rest of the chems in his system.”

Dr. Amari scrutinized the man and pursed her lips. “Fine. I’ll defer to your judgement.”

“Thank you.” He replied and stripped off the surgical gloves. With an awkward cough and held out
his large hand. “The name’s Virgil, by the way. Dr. Brian Virgil.”

Dr. Amari’s eyebrow cocked in surprise. “Dr. Virgil. From the Institute?”

He balked and looked around the room nervously. He spoke quickly, “Yeah but I left. I don’t work for them anymore. Hancock and I met at Sanctuary and he offered me a job here. That’s why I’m here. It’s not because — I just —“

Dr. Amari tried to suppress her smile but failed. “It’s alright. You’re safe here. Once Hancock is stable, how about I take a look at your eye. Nora really did a number on you, didn’t she?”

“Nora? How did you know about that? Not that you can’t, but —.” He stuttered and stumbled over his words. For a man of his reputation and intelligence, he still felt like a buffoon around women.

“I think we both have a lot of explaining to do.” She replied and began cleaning the gunshot wound on Hancock’s leg.

Although the clock on the wall showed that it was only half past four in the evening, Dr. Virgil felt like he hadn’t slept in days. With everything that had recently happened, from the journey to Goodneighbor, to sneaking into a town in the middle of a political coup, and now to patching up a man who had issued him no fewer than three death threats since meeting him, Virgil desperately wanted a stiff drink or three to process everything.

As Dr. Amari cleaned and mended Hancock’s minor wounds, he saw the genuine concern on the doctor’s face. Although the ghoul had shown no other signs of regaining consciousness, he heard the woman whispering soft words of encouragement as she cleaned the caked blood from his scalp and face.

She tended to him with the same care that a mother would tend to her children. Virgil looked away, feeling like he was intruding on a private moment, and started sanitizing and cleaning the medical instruments. Although he would never admit this to another person, he actually hoped that the idiot ghoul would pull through.

Glory, Drummer Boy, and Tinker Tom didn’t show up at Sunshine Tidings until eight o’clock the following morning. Nora was just ending her night watch duty when the trio rolled into town.

Glory was carrying a beastly looking combat rifle and had a second, smaller pistol holstered on her hip. Tom, on the other hand, was lugging a hiking backpack that was almost as large as he was. He dropped the bag onto the ground, removed his weird headgear, and mopped at the sweat dripping from this brow. Drummer Boy dropped his own smaller bag next to Tom’s, and Nora noticed that his left hand that had caught the brunt of the cryo mine explosion back at Greentech Genetics had been amputated.

Desdemona met them as they climbed up the rocky hillside. She and Glory embraced, and Glory whispered something in the other woman’s ear but Nora was too far away to hear what was said between them. The mahogany woman briefly glanced at Nora and she noticed that Glory’s expression was full of pity.

“Nora! Long time, no see.” Tom replied cheerily. Glory and Desdemona gave Tom a wide berth as they made their way towards the mess hall.

Tom’s expression fell when he eyed the pink scar on her temple and his voice fell to a hushed whisper. “Uh oh. I see the Institute got their hands on your brain. Did they implant nanobots in there? You got the look of someone who’s been living with nanobots.”
“Um … no.” Nora replied carefully. “The scar is from the cybernetics they gave me. They removed it after I …” Her voice faltered. After she screamed hateful things at her son, was what she wanted to say.

“Were you irritable? Depressed? Did ya have some violent mood swings?” He replied.

“Well yes, but —“

“— Those were the nanobots!” He insisted. “They roost in your head and insert teeny tiny microchips that screw around with your brain.”

Drummer Boy grinned when he joined them. “Yeah Tom. How do you think Nora single-handedly took on the raider base at Libertalia? The nanobots made her.”

“I knew it!” Tom replied. “Why do you think I wear my helmet? Those Institute agents won’t get anywhere near my precious cranium. Nope. They’ll never get their creepy metal hooks into my head.”

Drummer Boy chuckled as Tom picked up his cumbersome bag and dragged it to the main building.

“Don’t encourage him.” Nora hissed and hit Drummer Boy with the back of her hand.

“Oh c’mon Nora.” He replied. “Ever since we started hearing reports of your activities topside, Tom’s been coming up with conspiracy theories to explain your behavior. My favorite one is that you’re actually a remotely controlled synth unit and your real body is still on ice back in the Vault.”

“Look. I’m not exactly proud of what I’ve done.” She snapped.

“I know that.” He replied. “But you know how Tom gets. He’s brilliant in a lot of ways, but he has a simplistic understanding of human motives. He thinks that you only did what you did because the Institute had control of your mind, but everyone else knows that you were blackmailed and coerced into it. So for all intents and purposes and so I don’t have to listen to Tom’s conspiracy theories any more, just say the nanobots in your brain made you do it, okay?”

Drummer Boy grabbed the other end of Tom’s bulky bag and helped him carry it inside, meanwhile Deacon skipped up to her and draped his arm off her uninjured shoulder.

“So the gang’s all here. It’s nice to be reunited. This feels almost … normal. Well as normal as it can get for us. Hey, what’s eating you?”

“Nanobots apparently.” She replied, her voice thick with sarcasm.

“Ah. Yeah, I hate it when that happens. One time those nanobots got the Nuka Cola song stuck in my head. I almost put a bullet in my brain to get it to stop.” He grinned and then sang out in a too-cheery voice: What if there was a place with all the zip of Nuka-Cola? Wouldn’t that be the cheer-cheer-cheeriest place in all the world? Where the river’s made of Quantum. And the mountain tops are fizz. With fun games and rides for all the moms and pops and kids.

“Please stop.” She groaned. She could almost see the Nuka Cola mascots dancing across her father’s small television screen while he worked in the garage.

“Look, you know no to take Tom seriously right?” Deacon replied.
Nora’s jaw was set in a hard line. She knew that no matter what she did, she’d always have to deal with her actions as an Institute Courser. The people she killed, the lives she ruined, all of the memories that she tried to repress still haunted her. She didn’t like the idea that she’d have to justify her actions at Libertalia and at Covenant to everyone she met. It wasn’t fair.

“It doesn’t matter. He’s right in his own way.” She replied sadly. “I mean, have you ever done something so horrible that your entire reputation revolved around those horrible deeds?”

Deacon moved in front of her. He gently held onto both of her arms and she thought he was going to pull her into a hug, but instead he said, “Sometimes there are things that you can never escape from. You can try your damnedest, but these things always manage to catch up to you eventually.”

There was something in his expression that told Nora that he knew exactly what she meant.

“Are you just telling me this to humor me?” She asked.

“No.” He replied. “For once, this is the bullshit free truth.”

“And what did you do when you wanted to try to run away from your reputation anyway?” She asked.

Deacon grinned. “I joined the Railroad.”

She chuckled sadly, “And I hear you’re recruiting, so I guess that’s my next logical step, huh?”

Deacon’s eyebrows raised. “Are you serious? You understand that once you join, you’re one of us for life. There’s no take-backs. We’re kind of like a gang like that.”

Nora nodded. “I gotta do everything I can now to start rewriting my reputation in the wasteland before I become the leader of the most vilified organization in the Commonwealth.”

Deacon grinned, linked his arm with hers, and walked with her towards the mess hall. “It looks like Glory owes me two hundred caps.”

“Why?”

“She made a bet with me about which group you’d join up with first. Since I don’t count your forced stay in the Institute as a voluntary choice, and since you don’t formally assume the crown of Dictator … I mean, Director for another three days or so, I think it’s safe to say that I win.” He grinned.

“I’m so glad that my agonizing life decisions can provide you with such entertainment.” She drawled sarcastically.

“Oh, don’t be mad.” Deacon grinned. “All of us are the victims of tragic life decisions. If you don’t laugh about it now, you’ll end up crying about it later.”

As Deacon and Nora entered the building, the adamant conversations stopped and everyone turned their attention to Nora.

“Woah. Way to be weird, guys.” Deacon chided.

Desdemona stood up from the metal picnic table. A HAM radio was sitting nearby emitting static and her face was contorted into a mask of stoic professionalism, but her eyes betrayed that something was terribly wrong.
“Nora. Dr. Amari just made contact with us. She was looking for you. She said that Mayor Hancock’s been shot. He’s in critical condition since yesterday.”

Nora’s blood froze. “What? What happened!”

Glory spoke up, “I don’t know what caused it but suddenly there was a shit ton of gunfire going on in the town square. Things have been getting a bit dicey since you came back from the Institute. Some of the Goodneighbor ruffians have caught wind that Dez was trying to use the town as a Railroad safehouse. Well, that didn’t sit well with some of them so we’ve been slowly moving them over to Bunker Hill. Thankfully we got the last two out while people were caught up in the chaos and the fighting.”

The burly synth looked disappointed that she couldn’t take part in the fighting herself.

“Well I have to go and see him!” Nora exclaimed. “Dez, where’s my pack? I need to leave right now.”

The woman shook her head, “Nora. You’re not thinking clearly. You can’t leave right now. We only have three days before you go back to the Institute for Lord knows how long. We need to formulate a game plan to stay connected to you while you’re there. We have too much work to do here, I’m sorry. Besides, without Hancock as mayor, the town will be in a flux and people will be looking for others to blame. You showing up there could only make things worse.”

Nora was about to open her mouth to argue but closed it when she remembered the tension that Hancock told her about. If they thought that he was somehow a synth, then showing up on the tail end of a violent coup could only spell more danger for both of them. Desdemona was right and she hated herself for admitting that.

“Can I at least talk to Dr. Amari? I can’t sit here and not know what’s going on.” She exclaimed. Desdemona thought about it and then nodded. “Let me set up a secure channel for you to talk on.”

While the spy tinkered with the radio’s various dials and knobs, Deacon took a seat next to Nora and placed a consoling hand on her arm.

“I’m sorry.” He said.

Nora bit her lip and took in a shuddering breath. She didn’t trust herself to speak so she just nodded.

“It’s set up, Nora.” Desdemona replied. “We’ll be outside when you’re done.”

Nora moved closer to the radio and waited until the mess hall was completely empty before she pressed the button next to the large radio microphone.

“Amari?” Nora spoke into the radio receiver. “Are you there?”

“Nora, thank God.” the doctor replied. She sounded exhausted. “Are you okay?”

Nora ignored her question and countered with her own. “What happened? Is John okay?”

She heard the woman sigh. “He’s stable right now but he’s not out of the woods yet. Nora, he was shot in the head.”

Nora had no words. The world around her seems to freeze and she heard the crack of Kellogg’s pistol. She was back in the cryo chamber, but instead of seeing her husband’s vacant eyes looking
out of his own cryo pod, she saw Hancock’s soulful dark eyes dim and lifeless.

“Nora? Are you still there?” Dr. Amari asked.

“Yes. I’m still here.” Her voice was breathy and trembling.

“I’m sorry Nora. I know this isn’t the news you wanted to hear, but I thought you should know. Now, I know better than to ask you questions that could give away your location, but if it’s possible, you should come see him before …”

She heard Amari’s voice hitch and Nora croaked, “No. No. NO. I can’t…He’s going to be fine. He’s just —“ But her words died on her lips. “Look. Get Nick, okay? He should be there since I can’t. Hancock was there for Nick when the tables were turned. I know he’d want to be there for him.”

“Okay.” Amari sighed wearily. Then Nora heard a deep male voice call out for Dr. Amari’s help. The voice sounded like Virgil’s and that gave Nora a sliver of hope.

“Be safe Nora. I have to go.” The doctor replied and shut off her radio.

The static broke in again and Nora threw the microphone down on the table. She rose to her feet and rushed out of the building. The rest of the Railroad members looked at her questioningly but she shook her head.

Nora needed to be alone right now.

John’s sandy brown hair flopped over his forehead in a fashionably unkempt mess. The freckles that once dusted his nose and cheeks when he was a boy were now masked by the charcoal that decorated his cheeks like war paint. He did it to fit in with the gang of guys who caused trouble down in Goodneighbor. His brother said it made him look like a raider’s man whore, but he didn’t care. It was just one small act of rebellion in a city that cared so damn much about propriety, breeding, and social status.

“Jesus. Clean yourself up. You look like a beatnik, John.” His mother yelled at him as he trudged out of their small shack outside the loud water pump.

He paid her no mind. To be honest, he didn’t pay attention to any adults. They didn’t know what life was like for a young man like him; a man with ideals and dreams of bigger and better things. They were living pretty in their Great Green Jewel while people fought tooth and nail for every scrap they could get outside the walls.

John didn’t want to be handed things. He wasn’t born with a silver spoon in his mouth like his brother. No, John’s aspirations were high but he’d work his ass off to get there.

“You fall into a fire pit, kid?” Nick Valentine drawled when he saw the young man step into the vacant marketplace.

“Did the Institute forget to program you with funnier jokes?” He shot back with a smart-assed grin.

The synth puffed on his cigarette and turned back to reading an old copy of a Boston Bugle. “You’re gonna break your momma’s heart, ya know. I can’t keep fetching you from Goodneigbor strung off your ass from Jet.”
“Then don’t.” He replied. “Like I fuckin’ care.”

Nick shook his head and returned to reading his paper. But when John went to ascend the stairs that led to the city’s entrance, he ran into someone running down the same set of stairs.

When they collided, he felt like the wind got knocked out of him.

“Watch where you’re goin, sister.”

“Sorry.” The woman replied with a sheepish smile. “I’m new here.”

The woman was wearing a peculiarly numbered vault jumpsuit that hugged her assets rather nicely. Her brown hair was swept up into a ponytail and her green eyes held an eternal youthful optimism. Her breasts were no more than handfuls, not that he minded, and her ass had enough give that he was sure a firm smack would make the flesh jiggle deliciously. No, whoever this mystery beauty was, she didn’t seem to notice that a handsomely roguish man was openly eye fucking her in the streets.

She skipped down the last couple stairs and pranced over to where Nick was sitting. The synth detective swiveled around on the old barstool that he was perched on and grinned when he saw the woman. She slipped up against his chest and John suddenly felt jealous of that bucket of bolts. They both talked; the woman’s full pink lips curled up into a seductive smile and Valentine’s eyes glanced to the left and the right before extinguishing his cigarette. He slipped his arm around the woman’s waist. The gesture was protective but it was also something more.

Valentine looked back at John’s befuddled expression and tipped his hat and winked. Mr. Metal-Rod-Up-His-Ass actually winked as he escorted the knockout woman down the alley that led to his agency.

What the fuck? He thought. Since when did the synth fraternize with women? He always assumed that the synth was either devoid of those feelings or just knew he was too odd looking for most normal women to want. Besides, the guy was as old fashioned as it got. He’d probably need to ask the woman’s parents first if it was okay to woo their daughter.

John chuckled at the thought of him turning up outside of Irma’s mother’s shack over in East Boston with a bunch of hubflowers so he could say, “Hey, would you mind if I brought your daughter to Goodneighbor so I can play ‘hide the sausage’ with her in the VIP room in The Third Rail?”

No, that wasn’t his style. Besides he had other things planned than to be jealous of Nick and his new female friend. He pushed that girl out of his mind as he ascended the metal stairs that led out of the stuffy hellhole that he once called home.

John McDonough could have any girl he wanted. What made the Vault girl so special?
Take Me Away

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has left kudos, reviews, or is lurking in the background as a reader. I also appreciate the patience during my hiatus. I am excited for things to settle down a bit in my life.

And please excuse the blistering pace of this chapter. I keep adding more and more content without planning to and these last few chapters are going to be pretty lengthy.

Any feedback is always appreciated.

Chapter 19 - Take Me Away

Nora tossed and turned beneath the sleeping bag. The dark thoughts that she had worked so hard to stifle returned with a vengeance, and the magistrate that sat in her own heart and judged her sins wasn’t kind.

It’s your fault if he dies. He would’ve never gone back to Goodneighbor if you wouldn’t have run off.

“No.” Nora murmured in her sleep.

And if he does somehow survive, he’ll be a vegetable for the rest of his sorry life.

“No!” Nora repeated, stronger now.

Your Railroad code name should be ‘Black Widow.’ First your husband and now Hancock? Do you really think that Nick or Nate-the-synth-replacement won’t get hurt too because of you? You’re pathetic. You’re weak. You’re —

“No!” Nora roared and sat up on the bed.

A kerosene lamp sat nearby on the dirty concrete floor. The flame flickered lazily as it used up the last of the oil.

Nora threw open the nylon sleeping bag, slipped her feet in her cold boots, and shrugged on the thick jacket that Daisy had given her. She knew that going back to sleep would be impossible. At least not while her own mind was doing its best to put her on trial, so she opened the heavy wooden door and slipped out into the foggy new morning.

The cold air assaulted her face and her breath came out in a fine mist. The sky was brightening in the distance, but the timer that loomed in her mind ticked down another day: just three days left before she’d be back in the Institute’s clutches once again. Still, no matter what happened, Nora promised herself that she’d go back as a free woman and not as their hitman-for-hire.

“You’re up early.” Desdemona remarked. The sweet smell of cloves and the spiciness of tobacco wafted up through the air.
“I couldn’t sleep. What’s your excuse?”

The woman smirked but her expression held no mirth or ironic merriment. In fact, her expression was grim.

“You don’t live as long as me, when you’re in my line of work, without learning to adapt to your own limitations and environment.” She replied.

Seeing the blank look on Nora’s face, Desdemona elaborated.

“I don’t sleep.” She clarified.

Nora blinked dumbly. “As in ever?”

Desdemona shrugged. “No. I don’t need to. Synths don’t need to.”

This was news to Nora although she felt foolish for being so surprised.

“Oh. Well I didn’t know.” She replied lamely.

“It’s okay.” Desdemona replied. “It’s not something I advertise. My history’s a long and tragic one because I use to be so open about who I was when I was younger; nevertheless, I think our job only works as effectively as it does because synths know that the Railroad is a safe haven for them, as it was once for me.”

Nora nodded but then shook her head. She couldn’t get Desdemona’s comment about not sleeping to leave her mind. “Wait, do you really mean that you don’t sleep? Glory sleeps and she’s a synth.”

“Glory sleeps because she chooses to. Synths are capable of sleeping, but we don’t need it to function.”

“So why don’t you choose to sleep? I can’t imagine how boring it must be sitting awake while everyone else is in bed.” Nora said.

Desdemona’s face took on a grim countenance again. “I get more pleasure knowing that my friends are safe. Too many enemies use the cover of darkness to ambush others. I never want us to be ambushed, so I always take the evening watch.”

Nora remembered her first fitful sleep in the wasteland. She barely slept at all in her neighbor’s cellar. If Codsworth hadn’t been there to keep watch and to protect her, she knew that her first days in this new world would’ve been worse than they already were.

Nora changed the subject. “So is everyone in this organization a synth?”

“If they are, they didn’t disclose that information to me.” Desdemona replied and she took another drag from her cigarette. “But would it matter if they were? Synth. Human. Are we not the same?”

Nora thought about Diamond City’s prejudice towards ghouls and about the Commonwealth’s fear of synths. Like most stereotypes that bred bigotry and ignorance, the fears about ghouls and synths weren’t unfounded. Feral ghouls were a constant threat in the wasteland, and Gen-1 and Gen-2 synths operated as nothing more than pre-programmed robot killing machines, but Nora also thought of Nick and Hancock; two men whom she loved regardless of their existence on the humanity spectrum and affirmed that ghouls like Daisy and Hancock, and synths like Nick, Glory, and Desdemona proved the bigoted people wrong.
“No, it doesn’t matter.” She replied firmly. “You being a synth doesn’t change anything. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

Desdemona was satisfied with her answer and she motioned for Nora to take a seat in a vacant lawn chair. “While I appreciate that, there may come a time when you’ll have to forsake those very beliefs if it meant maintaining your cover. Could you do that?”

“The Institute already knows about my involvement with you.” Nora reminded her.

“I’m not talking about them. I’m talking about a threat far bigger than any of us.”

Nora frowned. “Do you mean the Brotherhood of Steel?”

Desdemona exhaled. Her cigarette smoke wreathed her face in a pale blue-grey plume.

“The Brotherhood once lived up to the ideals they stood for, but after their failed war with the Enclave in the Capital Wasteland, they became nothing more than glorified raiders. They raped the land for every ounce of scrap or tech that they could get their hands on. They committed mass murder on an entire settlement just to get the raw materials necessary to build their infernal airship. They may have bigger guns and flashier tech than your normal raider, but they are raiders nonetheless.”

Nora remembered Carrington mentioning something about living in the Capital Wasteland with Des. She also recalled Nick’s warnings about the Brotherhood when they left Fort Hagen. Not much rattled the detective, but his face held nothing but pure horror as they watched the giant airship float across the sky.”

“So how do we stop them?” Nora asked.

“We can’t.” Desdemona replied firmly. “Not with a force of eight agents and a handful of loyal but scared escaped synths. They’d tear us apart. Our number one mission right now is to lay low, regroup, hopefully recruit others, and help you do our work from inside the Institute. The only way for us to defeat the Brotherhood is to …” The woman paused and her face contorted into a look of pure disgust … “is to join forces with the Institute.”

“You know what they say, ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend.’” Nora replied.

Desdemona countered, “It’s not that simple. When you go back, you’ll be the Brotherhood’s prime target once they get word that the current Director has been replaced. For all I know, you could be going into a trap. The Institute could be using you, or the Brotherhood could already know about your son’s illness, but unless we have clearer information this is the best plan that we have right now.”

Nora sighed, the guilt rose up through her chest again. That warning sounded all too familiar, and last time she ignored it. “You’re not the first person to tell me that. Hancock thought I was being stupid for agreeing to go back to the Institute. He would’ve done everything possible to stop me from going.”

Desdemona understood the guilt that Nora was feeling. She and Nora had many differences, but both of them were stubborn, and sometimes that stubbornness caused them to make rash decisions.

“No, life is full of no-win situations, and I don’t envy the position that you’re in, but the first thing you’ll learn about being a leader is that you’re going to be forced to make hard decisions. This is one of those times. You have to go into this knowing that you are satisfied with your choice. You can’t back out at the last minute. You have to commit and hope that the choice you
made was the right one.”

For a moment, Desdemona looked far older than the late thirty year old woman that she purported to be. Her eyes held a kind of wisdom that could only be acquired through painful and hard-learned experiences.

“And what if someone dies because of my decisions?” Nora asked.

The woman’s pale face was haunting. “You have to find a way to cope. Otherwise you’ll have a lot of sleepless nights ahead of you.”

The morning passed by quietly. Spies and settlers milled around as Nora thought about Desdemona’s words. After their early morning discussions, Nora finally told Desdemona that she had to move on. Although she didn’t specify the location, the astute spy could read between the lines. Her only request was that Nora wait until Deacon got back so they could induct her into the Railroad properly.

It took her another eight hours to build up the courage to pack her things, amid the various briefings and meetings that Desdemona forced her to attend. Her mind swam with intel about the synths that were looking to escape and about the locations of various crucial Institute servers and terminals that she was suppose to bug with Tom’s feminine-named gadget. Although Nora listened politely and took dutiful notes on the back of a piece of dry cardboard, her mind kept drifting back to Hancock and back to what Desdemona had said.

While she waited, she helped Glory shuck corn and wash carrots to add to a stew that was bubbling over an open fire. Meanwhile, the Sunshine Tidings settlers were busy tending to the struggling crops as they fought the frozen ground for nutrients.

“Do these settlers know you are with the Railroad?” Nora asked Glory.

“Yeah. Most are either synth sympathizers or synths themselves that Patriot has helped rescue. This place is just one of our handful of safe houses dotted across the Commonwealth. Although after what happened at Greentech and with the sacking of our old HQ, many synths find that its safer to integrate into non-allied settlements and larger cities but hide who they truly are. It’s a shame, really.”

As they finished adding the corn and carrots to the stew, Deacon crested the dirt hill with a smug smile. He was carrying to bottles of red wine and Nora could hear clanking coming from his back. Apparently the induction of a new recruit was a celebration rather than a formality.

Seeing her drawn face, Deacon offered her one of the bottles. “Why so glum, sugar plum? New recruits get to try the good vintage first.”

Nora saw the red liquid slosh around in the clear bottle and felt her own stomach acids slosh around in her gut. Memories of Ayo’s failed seduction flashed in her mind and she bit her tongue to keep herself from vomiting on Deacon’s shoes. “You enjoy that. I need to keep a clear head if I’m going to make it to my destination before midnight.”

Deacon shrugged, “Suit yourself. It took Tommy Whispers a half bottle of bourbon before he could come up with a good code name. Do you wanna guess what it was?”

“Was it ‘Whisper?’” Nora asked.

Deacon winked. “Of course. What else would it be?”
It didn’t take long for the group to get settled with a bowl of stew and with glasses, mugs, and even an empty coffee pot of their choice beverages. Nora settled on a Nuka Cola hoping that the carbonation would settle her stomach.

Desdemona rose from a green lawn chair. The rest of the agents, including Nora, were crowded around a rusty but sound picnic table. She cleared her throat and the room fell silent.

“Nora. You have proven to us that you are not only loyal but you are selfless. You are willing to put the needs of others — synth or otherwise — ahead of your own. That type of selflessness is rare in a world like ours. There will be many challenges ahead of you, but I am confident that you will rise to meet them. Are you ready to join us, sister?”

“Yes,” Nora responded.

“And will you protect your brothers’ and sisters’ identities and the Railroad’s secrecy even under threat of torture or death?”

“Yes.”

“Then welcome to the Railroad, agent.” Desdemona replied with gravitas in her voice.

The table bursted into raucous hoots and hollers. Even Carrington managed a small smile. Glory patted her on the back and Tom gently kissed her cheek. Deacon winked at her. Eventually Desdemona motioned for the group to quiet down.

She said, “A part of the Railroad tradition is that you choose a code name to go by. After all, secrecy keeps us alive. So what should we call you?”

“How about Nora?” She replied.

Deacon groaned. “Now’s not the time to be a wise ass, Nora. This is serious.”

“Then choose for me,” She shot to Deacon. “I don’t care what you call me.”

Desdemona sighed, “It doesn’t work like that. You need to choose a name. It’s your life, your name, and therefore your choice.”

“What about Charmer?” Deacon piped in. “You were certainly charming enough when we first met, and by that I mean you weren’t charming at all. It could be an ironic name. You know, like Tiny for a giant or Slim for a fat guy.”

“I really don’t care.” Nora was feeling antsy. She had too much on her mind to decide on such a banal think as a nickname. “Call me Flying Eagle or … dammit … I don’t know, Red Panda.”

“C’mon, now you’re just making up animal names.” Glory complained.

Desdemona sighed, “I guess we’ll call you Wanderer. It seems fitting since you’re so keen to go wandering into trouble.”


“To Wanderer.” Desdemona replied a little stiffly. Everyone held up their beverages and toasted Nora.

“To Wanderer!”
Nora found the loose panel that she and Hancock had escaped through when they had left Goodneighbor and moved the sheet metal aside just far enough to slip her body through.

The windows in the Old State House were dark. Without it’s mayor, the building sat dormant; it was just another relic of a bygone era, a piece of history frozen in the sands of time.

She walked quickly towards the red lights of the Memory Den. Her eyes were cast downward and her hands were stuffed in her pockets. The gun on her hip made her feel a little better, but her nerves were sitting on a knife’s edge.

A few citizens threw her some suspicious looks, but a drifter was a normal occurrence in Goodneighbor and based on the bags under her eyes and the permanent scowl she had etched on her face, they assumed that this drifter was looking for an escape of the cerebral variety so they left her alone.

The theater house's interior was dim and cozy like always. The triumphant close to another Silver Shroud radio show was muffled but it’s nostalgic musical outro added a homely atmosphere to the former peep house.

Irma was nowhere to be seen, and for that, Nora was grateful. She descended the wooden stairs that led to Amari’s dim office. The assaultive smell of rubbing alcohol and the metallic tang of blood hit her nose.

“Sorry, but I’m not seeing any — “

“It’s me, Amari.” Nora replied.

The doctor looked up from her desk. Her normally shrewd and calculating eyes were red-rimmed and watery. She let her clipboard drop to the table and she swept the woman up in her arms. Nora gently received the hug, but caught sight of a tricorn hat and a ruffled, blood-stained jacket sitting neatly folded on an empty gurney.

Her heart skipped a beat, “Did — is he?”

Dr. Amari stepped away and looked at the garments. “Miraculously, no. But …”

The doctor gently took her hand and led her over to a hospital bed that was tucked behind a green medical partition. The trills and beeps from an old fashioned paper EKG broke the stillness in the air. The metal needle blipped steadily but slowly across the rolling piece of thin paper.

Hancock’s body was propped slightly up against a mismatched assortment of pillows. Thick gauze and cotton padding encircled his entire head, ending above his right eye. Nora saw smaller square patches taped to his scarred, wiry chest. His blood was starting to peak through the other side of the cotton; they’d need to be changed soon.

“He fell into a coma.” Amari murmured. “We’ve been keeping him comfortable and tending to his other injuries, but we don’t know the extent of the brain damage. I can’t put him in a memory lounger until he is conscious. Tinkering with his memory while he’s in a coma could irrevocably damage his fragile mind.”

Nora walked to the side of the bed. Her fingers gently trailed over the coarse blanket until her skin met his mottled hand. His hand felt feverish and Nora placed gently caressed her hand along his ruined cheek.
“He’s burning up.” She commented.

“It’s a ghoul thing.” Dr. Amari commented. “His body is trying to repair itself by speeding up cellular regeneration. If this were any other case, I’d suggest leaving him in the middle of a radiation choked area for a bit, but while radiation helps ghouls heal quickly it can also cause tissue degeneration in their brain. It’s a Catch-22 I’m afraid.”

“Did he say anything? Was he conscious when he was brought in?” Nora asked.

Amari paused and Nora turned to the woman. She bit her lip uncertainly; that was the look of a woman who was hiding an important secret.

“Amari?”

“He asked for you, Nora.” The woman pursed her mouth. She was going to leave it there, but something buzzed in her ear which heartened her to go on.

“He was conscious for a brief amount of time. I was able to ask him questions to confirm that the bullet didn’t affect his ability to see or hear, but he did exhibit signs of retrograde amnesia. Unfortunately, I can’t study how it’s affected him until I can scan his brain.

“Retrograde amnesia? What do you mean? What’s that?”

“Patients who are victims of traumatic brain injuries may be unable to make, store, or retrieve memories from before the incident. John remembered who I was, but didn’t remember Virgil, a man who he had just traveled with. He was confused by a few details and thinks that his mother is still alive despite the fact that she's been dead for years now.” Dr. Amari said. “I don’t know the extent of his amnesia, but I’m worried that he wont remember rather formative moments in his life.”

“Formative moments? What do you mean?”

The doctor sighed, “What troubles me the most is that he won't remember doing that —“ She gestured at his mottled and radiation ravaged skin — “to his body. I had just arrived in Goodneighbor when it happened. I’m afraid that if he wakes up, he’ll see the effects of his ghoulification and panic. The sheer trauma of seeing something like that could set him off in a tailspin of chem abuse and other reckless behavior.”

“Do you think he’ll remember other people? If he remembers you, do you think he’ll remember Nick?” What Nora wanted to say was do you think he’ll remember me?

“I’ve sent Irma to get Nick. Of all the people in John’s life, he’s been the most constant.” She replied. “But there’s no way of telling if he’ll remember you, Nora. I’m so sorry.”

An uneasy silence fell between the women and Nora looked back at Hancock. The ghoul’s chest rose and fell evenly, almost peacefully, and she wanted nothing more than to curl up against his body.

“This is my fault.”

“Nora, no.” Dr. Amari interjected

She turned to the doctor and released the pent up guilt that she had been carrying. “Yes it is! I ran out on them both. The day I left, John and I argued about me going back to the Institute. I knew he wouldn’t let me go, and I knew Nick would be too honorable to let me go alone, so I snuck out of
Sanctuary in the middle of the night.

“Nora, why—“

“I know, I know.” She said rushed. “Why would I go back there after everything that happened? It’s complicated. I can’t fill you in on everything, but one of the main reasons is because I found out that my son is dying. He has cancer and it’s terminal.”

Amari tutted sympathetically.

“And.” Nora continued. “Maybe this will be the only time that I can do right by him as his mother. I gave birth to him, so it seems only right that I’m by his side when he dies.”

Amari sighed, “Nora, you are shouldering a lot of responsibility that shouldn’t be yours to bear.”

“I know, but that’s my choice.”

The doctor swept her up in her arms again and Nora burred her face into her shoulder. Sobs tore through her chest but no tears came with it.

“Nora…” Amari’s voice was choked with emotion.

Nora coughed and pulled away, “Please don’t tell Nick that I was here. I know that I broke his heart when I left. I don’t want him to think that I’m purposely being cruel by having to leave him again.”

“He’ll find out somehow.” Amari replied. “He always does. It’s that detective sense, I think.”

Nora nodded, “I know, but John needs him more than I do now.”

Amari frowned when she saw Nora sling her pack back onto her shoulders.

“You don’t have to run off just yet. Give yourself a moment to relax. Just let me change John’s bandages and then you can have some privacy to be with him. Irma just left, so it will take them a couple of hours to get back.”

“I’m sorry. I have to go. There’s other people I have to visit.” Nora replied.

Amari saw how Nora stiffened every time she glanced at Hancock. The guilt and the shame that marred her face was unmistakeable, but Amari also saw a small bit of relief.

“Nora, there’s a chance that John’s memories of you may never come back. But I can install something into the memory lounger to —“

“No.” Nora interrupted. “It’s safer this way. He can’t be hurt if he doesn’t remember me.”

Although she was overjoyed that Hancock was alive, Nora remembered Mamma Murphy’s haunting words. She didn’t put much stock into prophecy or drug-induced visions, but she did have enough sense to not test fate. If Hancock was destined to be the “one who will forget her” then she didn’t want to do something that would change his fate. Him living without remembering her was just a small price to pay. At least he was alive at all.

Her delicate fingers ran lightly across his ruined, bony knuckles, but his hand didn’t move in response. She gave his hand one final squeeze before trudging out of Amari’s office and back up the stairs.
Nora rationalized that this was the best outcome. With Hancock alive, Goodneighbor would return to its independent and lively self. Maybe Hancock would become more adored than he already was now that he helped end a coup that threatened to destroy his city. Of course, miraculously surviving a gunshot wound to the head catapulted him into hero or God-like status. Nora shook her head at the thought of what that would do to Hancock’s ego.

If destiny was indeed a real force, then Nora wondered that maybe it was her destiny to assume the mantle of ‘wanderer’ after all. Ever since she crawled out of that vault, Nora knew that she was on a perilous but important journey. The people she met on the way who helped shape her, teach her, love her, and save her were just a sum total of experiences. As Desdemona said, she had to commit, and maybe becoming Director of the Institute was why she survived instead of Nate. Still, no matter what, Nora knew that this was one journey that she had to walk alone.

Forty-eight hours later, Nora crouched behind a crumbling retaining wall to scope out the mutant activity in the CIT building.

Although the windows were cracked and shattered which made establishing sight lines impossible, she could smell the sickening sweet stench of rotting flesh — the telltale sign of Super Mutants.

Synth Nate had told her that the eastern stairwell would be her best bet to access the roof undetected, so she stole across the frozen ground with her pistol drawn. She had two frag grenades attached to her belt and she slipped through the heavy oak doors.

After she left Dr. Amari’s, Nora took a detoured route to Diamond City. Although it was risky, she kept an eye out for Nick from the rooftops of ruined apartment buildings. It didn’t take her long to spot Nick running past the Boston Library with Irma providing cover. As they ran in the direction of Goodneighbor, Nora snuck off undetected and made her way to the Great Green Jewel one last time to say her good-byes.

Arturo had given her the two grenades that were now attached to her belt. He also kissed her cheek, his goatee pleasantly tickled her skin.

“No matter what happens, my shop is always open to you mi amiga,” He said warmly.

Piper’s reaction was more guarded. At first she took Nora’s announcement as a form of betrayal: “I can’t believe you’re defecting to the dark side Blue! I know that he’s your son and all but —“

Nat cut in, “You’d do the same if you were in her position, Piper.”

The reporter sighed. The bite in her words and her consternation were subdued. “Yeah, I guess you’re right kiddo.”

Nora clasped the woman’s shoulder. “Piper, I owe my life to you, and I know how this must seem, but I may be the best hope you have to uncover information about the Institute and their practices.”

“Like an inside source!” Nat chimed in.

“Exactly!” Nora replied. “I may not be able to leave the Institute, but the Railroad has given me a way to communicate with the outside world. I don’t know how it works, but here’s the device.”

Nora produced a small cartridge that was thin and square. It looked to be about twice the size of a holotape cartridge and it had fine wires, microchips, and intricate plastic casing webbed across it.

“I don’t know much about computers, but I know that Nick does. When he gets back from
Goodneighbor, have him install this on your personal terminal and I’ll be able to talk with you from
a private server.”

“Say, that’s pretty handy Blue.” Piper replied, “But why only one? Something like this would be
amazing to install on any terminal in the Commonwealth.”

“There were two devices made. The Railroad has one and you have the other. I gave you the
second one because you’re a master at dispensing important information quickly. I heard about how
you spread the word about the Watchers and that they had to be exterminated. This is the same
idea, just on a larger scale.”

“That’s great Blue, really.” Piper replied, “I suppose I should give Nicky some time to talk with
you too.” The reporter shot her a smirk.

“If that’s what he wants.” Nora replied, her voice neutral despite the ache in her chest. “But maybe
give him some time. I didn’t exactly leave things well between us.”

“None of that will matter in a few days.” Piper reassured her. “I know Nicky. He isn’t one to hold a
grudge.”

“Plus it’s obvious that he’s crazy about you.” Nat interjected with a knowing grin.

Piper mirrored her sister’s expression, “Just promise that you’ll keep the love notes PG-13. I have a
young, impressionable kid sister who likes to play Atomic Command on the terminal.”

“I’ll do my best.” Nora promised and tousled Nat’s hair.

Nora’s final meeting was the hardest. When she turned the knob that led to Valentine’s Detective
Agency, it was as though history was repeating itself.

“We’re closed.” Ellie’s strained voice called out. “The Detective is out on a personal matter. He
won’t be back for a few days.”

“I’m actually hoping that you could help me.” Nora replied.

Ellie’s eyes snapped up from her paperwork. “Nora!”

The brunette hugged her with such force that Nora stumbled back into the filing cabinets.

“Oh Nora! Nick’s already gone. He told me that you had run out on him and then that lady from
The Memory Den arrived to tell him that Mayor Hancock has been shot in the head.” Ellie’s
response came out in one rushed, frantic breath.

“I know, I know.” Nora responded. “It’s a long story and I’m running short on time here. Let me
start from the beginning and I’ll tell you everything …”

As Nora worked her way through the CIT’s ruined and half-collapsed hallways, she felt lighter
than she had in a while. Although she hated good-byes, she felt like she was doing the best she
could. She hoped that she’d be able to see them all again one day. Relaxing the Institute’s staunch
isolationist policies in addition to atoning for the atrocities that they had committed was one big
leap in the direction of peace. Maybe one day, the world would be stable enough for her to fully
merge the Institute with the rest of the Commonwealth, and she’d be able to pick up her life where
she had left off.

Nora made it to the roof access doors without issue. Thankfully the Super Mutants that had taken
up residence in the building were mostly contained in the courtyard and first floor hallways.

She took in a deep breath, pushed open the heavy doors, and emerged into the cold winter evening and saw her son standing on the roof looking out across the wasteland.

His back was turned to her and she cleared her throat when she approached.

“I’m glad you made it here, Mother.”

When he turned, she was struck by her son’s sickly appearance. His piercing blue eyes were dull and watery, and his skin was showing signs of liver spots that Nora hadn’t noticed before. His lips were pale and his hair was thinning. He had lost weight and it made him look delicate and fragile.

But despite all of this, he still tried to keep up appearances. He dressed well. He was wearing his usual white lab coat, but wore a long, grey dress jacket over it. His hands were covered in black leather gloves, and he wore a blue wool scarf wrapped tightly around his neck.

He cleared his throat and took a step towards Nora. “You know, in all my years, I’ve never set foot outside the Institute. Not once, since the day they brought me here. I’ve never had a reason. Seeing the world like this. It really puts everything into perspective.” His voice was quiet but calm. Nora had expected him to sound more frail, but he just sounded tired.

“Standing here, I’m reminded how fortunate I am that I was spared a life in this wasteland.”

Nora sighed, “I came alone like you asked, but this better not be a trick.”

Father nodded, obviously pleased. “It’s not, Mother. I asked you to meet me alone because what I’m about to tell you is sensitive information. Excuse me for one moment.”

He pulled a small device which looked like a handheld radio and switched it on. A faint, high-pitched ringing filled the air. The noise was so irritating that it bordered on being painful.

“This is to scramble any tech in the area.” Father replied banally. “I can’t trust that your Railroad friends aren’t eavesdropping on our conversation.”

Nora didn’t dignify his suspicions with an answer, but thought about the computer chip that she had stashed in her bra. She thought that Deacon was being paranoid, but now she realized that the spy was astounding at anticipating other people’s moves.

“There’s a war coming Nora.” Father’s voice was firm and they both looked out towards the Boston Airport where the large airship was docked. “While the Railroad’s been a thorn in my side since the beginning, I’m afraid we have a bigger threat at our door. According to Dr. Li’s past knowledge of these brutes, these Brotherhood of Steel have fled here and now plan to carve out a place in the world to call their own. They exterminate anything in their way, horde technology for themselves, and now they plan to destroy the greatest hub of technology that ever existed on the East coast. They think that by killing us all, that they are cleansing the Commonwealth of the same scourge that destroyed the Capital Wasteland.”

“Funny, I thought that was your plan all along -- cleansing the Commonwealth.” Nora replied darkly. “You know, what with replacing people topside with synth dopplegangers and unleashing Super Mutants out in the wasteland.”

Father remained unmoved by Nora’s biting comments. “I wont deny that both of those initiatives were done on my orders, but I also am beginning to see how I’ve been short sighted in my vision.”
Nora rolled her eyes, “Oh come on. You don’t think I’m going to believe that. Here you are waxing prophetic about the Brotherhood’s nefarious actions, but the last time I saw you, you seemed perfectly fine with your decision to imprison me for killing someone out of self-defense. What caused this drastic change of heart?”

Father didn’t answer her immediately and Nora took the opening to unleash another verbal assault.

“You’re a hypocrite, Shaun. You tell me that synths are nothing more than tools who don’t have free will, and then you create a synth version of your father so you can get to know him. How does that work? He’s not a walking, talking history book. You created him with such care and skill that even he thinks he’s Nate. Either you just love to psychologically torture people or deep down you believe that synths are more.

Father looked troubled, no, he looked guilty. But Nora continued.

“And to top it all off, you berate me at every turn for my choice in my friends, companions, and even my lovers, but you’re perfectly fine if a human associate of yours rapes me under your roof. After everything you’ve done so far, how can I trust you?”

The words spilled out of her mouth before she could stop them. They were words of pain but also harsh truth.

He cleared his throat. His Adam’s apple bobbed in his thin throat as he swallowed down his emotions, “I did not handle the incident with Ayo well, I’ll freely admit that, nor was I sensitive to your mental health struggles. You have every right to be disappointed in me, Mother. I could list off every reason as to why I did what I did, but in the end it all boils down to this: I was scared.”

Nora scoffed. “Right. And I’m supposed to let everything go because you were scared? Scared of what? You’re the Director of the most powerful organization in the Commonwealth. Do you know how many people go to bed at night wondering if the Institute boogyman is going to kidnap them in their sleep? Or what about the family who knows that their husband isn’t coming home because he was murdered by a Super Mutant raid party? Or what about --”

“Enough!” Father interrupted, “Please. Enough. I’ll atone for my own sins once the time comes, but I don’t have enough time for this conversation. I didn’t come here to engage in more arguing. The Brotherhood will march on us sooner rather than later, and I have a proposition for you.”

He turned to Nora and she noticed the grave look on his face. The wrinkles around his eyes were prominent and he matched the countenance and physicality of an old man.

“As was discussed in my note, when I die, I would like to name you my successor as Director of the Institute. I do this with no hidden agenda and with no false hope that you’ll continue in my footsteps doing the work that I’ve tried to accomplish.”

“Why me? Surely there’s others who are far more qualified.” She replied.

“There surely are.” He responded, “But I chose you, Nora. I chose you because, deep down, I think you can give the Institute it’s best chance for survival. There are others with more ambition and many are more qualified, but all will run the Institute into the ground while pursuing their own selfish visions. You may not believe it, but I do care about the people who live at the Institute, even the synths, I suppose. I was raised there. Many of the top scientists now were my peers growing up. I’ve watched them raise their children and their accomplishments, both personally and professionally, only happened because the Institute exists.”
“Why would the other scientists even accept me? Surely I’m hated for what I did to Ayo and it’s no secret that I’m not exactly scientifically inclined.” Nora replied.

“Yes, many of the scientists will be slow to trust you but that will come in time. Of the people who have final say, I believe you already have Dr. Li’s unwavering loyalty and her vote. Dr. Binet can be persuaded, in fact, you both could probably bond over your mutual hatred towards me. Dr. Fillmore is loyal to me and therefore she will vote for whomever I choose. The two remaining ones to convince would be Dr. Holdren and Dr. Secord, but since we’d have the majority vote, it wouldn’t matter if you couldn’t sway them to your side.”

“Shouldn’t something of this magnitude be as unanimous as possible?” Nora asked. “My work will be cut out for me if I have the leads of the SRB and of BioScience as my enemies from the start.”

“They’ll come around to you in time.” Father remarked. “You’re compassionate and stubborn.” His lips pulled into a thin grin, “Once they realize that you’re not going anywhere, I’m sure they will fall in line.”

“You know that your weird synth creation project will be the first thing I’ll change.” Nora warned.

“I assumed that would be the case. Dr. Binet will be happy to discuss changes to the process and the programming of these synths to make it more humane.”

“And I’ll release the ones who want to leave.” She continued.

Father frowned and then sighed, “Yes, I figured that too.”

“And I’ll begin paying the ones who do stay.” She replied.

Father shook his head. “And here I thought you didn’t want the job.”

Nora blinked dumbly. She couldn’t believe it. Everything was sounded too good to be true.

“What’s the catch?” She replied. “Nate said that I’d not be allowed to come back if I decided to accept this position. Unless you plan to lock me up again, you know that I won’t abide by that rule. I can’t. At least not indefinitely. I need a timeline to work with.”

Father nodded. “That condition was added as a way to ensure that the changeover in power goes smoothly, and it was never intended to be permanent. Like any form of law and order, there’s bound to be some challenges when a new order is instituted, but once things settle down, you’re free to come and go as you please. In the meantime, I’ve accepted your negotiation to allow the synth prototype back into the fold regardless of how I feel about your distasteful choice in partners.”

“Nick’s no longer coming with me.” Nora replied. “Which means that as soon as I am able to go topside, I will. How long am I to be locked away in your scientific mecca?” Nora asked. “Five months was a bit too long for my taste last time.”

“I don’t have a set time limit. This is not meant to be a prison sentence, Nora. My wish for you to remain underground is to protect you. I know you won’t abide by my wishes at first, but I do know that when I die, you will have a whole new target painted on your back. The Brotherhood will be looking for the Institute’s leader. They will stop at nothing to kill you and to destroy the work that all of us have built. Staying below ground is the surest way to keep you safe.”

Nora knew he wouldn’t relent, but neither would she. She decided to table that discussion for now.
“We must be going Nora.” Father replied. “We have a lot of work to do”

“Lead on, then.”

Her son nodded and spoke in to his wrist communicator, “This is Father. I’m requesting relay transport for myself and for Nora.”

The blue relay field crackled around them both. The Commonwealth landscape disappeared around her and felt a brief weightless sensation before the bright artificial lights of the Institute's atrium blinded her.
The pace of the Brotherhood quest line has been substantially advanced to match up with my pacing. (Not that it matters since Nora isn’t aligned with the Brotherhood.)

There’s a lot of FO3 backstory which will help flesh out what all our FO3 characters were running from and hopefully make Elder Maxon into a more multidimensional antagonist.

And thank you to the reader who pointed out my inconsistency with how the molecular relay worked in this fic. After The Dark I Know So Well is complete, I will be going back in the story to edit out the errors, spruce up some things, and hunt out those pesky typos.

There will be a third and final story to round out this storyline called "Build Me Up From Bones." I've been having a blast writing this fic so thanks for the support and the encouragement.

Chapter 20 — Lost in Paradise

Elder Maxson walked through the Prydwen’s hull inspecting the various areas with an eagle eye for detail. Every soldier stopped what they were doing and saluted him as he passed, and he returned their greeting with a curt nod and a dismissal of “carry on.”

The men and women aboard this ship worked efficiently and with a singularity of purpose. Being mission ready at all times was of the utmost priority. Slacking off, even a little, could create a chink in their forged steel chain that could break the entire operation apart.

“Paladin Danse,” Maxson said, “Welcome back.”

The Paladin was still in his Power Armor. The metal hull was scuffed and scratched all to hell, but it still was functional.

“Glad to be back, sir.” He responded with the Brotherhood salute.

Although Elder Maxson was still in training when Danse had joined the Brotherhood as a Knight, he was impressed with how the man’s integrity and sense of duty always won out, even under the direst moments.

Danse was integral in capturing and defending the Adams Air Force base as the Brotherhood worked to build the Prydwen from the parts of Old World fighter jets and bombers. Although taking the base back from the Enclave was a minor victory in terms of the hard fought and bloody battle for the Capital Wasteland, the Brotherhood accepted the small victory nonetheless.

“It looks like you took some hits Danse.” Maxson noted.

“Yes, sir.” Danse replied. “The Cambridge Police Station and the surrounding areas were infested with ferals. We held our positions as best as we could, but they broke through our barriers twice.
The first time, Knight Rhys was injured, and the second time I was swarmed by seven until Scribe Haylen could provide some cover fire.”

“Are you injured?”

“No, sir. But my armor is in rough shape.”

“Drop off your suit with Proctor Ingram, get some food from the mess hall, and then report back to me. I would like a full report of your time spent at the Cambridge Police Station.”

“Yes sir.” Dance replied and saluted. “Ad Victoriam.”

Maxson mimicked his response and stepped aside so Danse could pass through the narrow corridor.

The Elder strolled continued down the hallway and then knocked twice on the metal door that led to Proctor Quinlan’s lab.

“Come in.” He heard a snooty tenor voice reply.

When Proctor Quinlan saw the Elder, he dropped the thick file folder that was in his hands onto his desk and saluted the man.

“At ease,” Maxson replied and closed the door behind him.

“Arthur, you know that you don’t have to knock. You’re the bloody Elder, you have free reign to come and go on this ship as you see fit.” Quinlan replied, hastily adjusting the glasses that had fallen down his long nose.

“Just because I’m the leader doesn’t mean I can act like a boor. Give me some credit, hm? I was raised in the wasteland, but that doesn’t mean I’m some savage.”

“Quite.” Proctor Quinlan agreed and then opened the file folder that he had dropped and handed Maxson a paper clipped section. “Here’s my latest findings about the Institute, Elder. You’ll be happy to see that I’ve made some substantial breakthroughs in cracking through their encryptions.”

Maxson opened the file and skimmed the reports. Most of the information were rumors that were already confirmed by Brotherhood Scribes who were operating undercover in Goodneighbor, Bunker Hill, and Diamond City. They knew that the Institute was located beneath the CIT ruins. They also knew that the Institute’s most current line of synths were physically identical to humans. And they verified reports of a woman who, up until a couple months ago, dispersed the Institute’s vengeance on the unsuspecting wasteland inhabitants. That last detail was what worried him the most.

Proctor Quinlan cleared his throat, “Sir, if I may.” He pulled out a short report from the back of the file and set it in front. “While trying to hack through the CIT’s network remotely, I discovered information about a Vault far to the north which specialized in cryo engineering. A month ago, I had one of my scribes accompany a Brotherhood patrol team while they did some recon around Concord. I had them visit the vault and this is what they found.”

Maxson’s eyes narrowed as he read the terminal printouts of Vault 111. “Pod B1: Mr. DiPietro... Occupant status: Deceased. Cause of Death: Asphyxiation due to Life Support failure. Pod B2. Cause of Death: Asphyxiation ... Pod B3 —“

“Look at C6 and C7” Proctor Quinlan interrupted.
Proctor Quinlan nodded gravely. “I may be a man of science, but I do believe that history has a tendency to repeat itself.”

“This isn’t the same.” Maxson growled and tossed the file folder back onto the desk.

“You saw the timestamps yourself.” Proctor Quinlan replied. “The first pod containing the father and the infant child were opened some sixty years ago, but the woman …”

Elder Maxson narrowed his eyes and turned away from the scientist. He could still hear the screams of his family and his brethren as they fell to the Enclave’s lasers and artillery explosions. Even as a ten year old boy, he had a bloodlust that would rival the most seasoned Paladin in the field, but it was a thirst that he had to subdue … until now.

“So you think the woman has joined up with the Institute.” Maxson growled. His voice was steady and low, but Proctor Quinlan could see the infernal blaze of retribution in the young man’s eyes.

“That would be the most realistic assumption, sir.” He replied.

“Then it would seem our job has been made easy for us.” Maxson growled. He saluted Proctor Quinlan who saluted back, albeit tentatively.

“Sir?”

“You and Proctor Igram need to assemble your best team of scribes. One team will stay here with you both while the other one will be sent out into the field to salvage materials that you will need for your project.” Maxson ordered.

“What is the project sir?”

“We’re reconstructing Liberty Prime.” Elder Maxson said. “If this Nora Pendleton is the same Institute agent from two months ago, then she will die as her precious Institute goes up in flames. History will not repeat itself. Not this time.”

When the blinding lights dimmed enough for Nora to see, she saw that Father’s hand was gently holding on to her arm.

“Shaun?”

Father let go of her suddenly; it was though he had been shocked and he smiled apologetically.

“Forgive me. I am not use to traveling via our relay system. I imagine you get use to it after a while, but the process of dematerializing is disconcerting to say the least.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get use to it.” She replied with a gentle smile.

A short, squat woman approached them and held out her hands expectantly. “Mother, your bags need to be searched and then they will be brought to your private quarters.”

Nora glanced at Father who simply nodded. Apparently some things never changed, but she took solace in the fact that all of her sensitive information — including the Railroad’s second terminal chip — were in her pocket and not in her bags.
She handed over her pack to the woman who shrugged the strap onto her shoulders and lifted it onto her back easily despite her petite size.

“Your weapons too, if you please.” Father replied.

Nora sighed but handed over her pistol (which she realized would be the second gun the Institute has taken from her), a few boxes of ammo, a large hunting knife that she had hidden in her boot courtesy of Hancock, and a small .44 pistol that she concealed in her left jacket pocket.

“Thank you Mother.” the synth replied and walked off towards the SRB.

Dozens of Institute residents observed the spectacle from the balconies and a handful more synths stopped working and intently watched Nora. Their expressions ranged from confusion and pity to anger and disgust. She caught Alan Binet’s eye. He had lost weight which made him look skeletal and the bags under his eyes only highlighted the unbridled look of hatred that he directed towards the both of them.

“Mother, if you’d please accompany me, I have called a directorate meeting; I want to make this announcement sooner rather than later.” Father replied, seemingly nonplused by the tension that had rapidly built in the room since their arrival.

Nora followed Father through the commissary hall and into a smaller elevator. She watched as Father slid an ID card through a keycard slot and then pressed a button on the elevator labeled “D.”

“In these next couple of days, I’ll be filling you in on the various short-term and long-term projects that the scientists are working on. You’ll be given complete access to the Institute’s mainframe to communicate with the scientists from your living quarters.” He said.

The elevator stopped gently and the door chimed as it opened. Nora had never been in this hallway before.

“Down to the left is my private quarters,” Father explained as they walked through a glass encased walkway that encircled the Atrium’s perimeter. “and down this hallway is the main meeting room where the Directorate assembles twice a month to set goals, discuss future plans for improvement, air grievances, and share scientific findings and data. Your role is to listen and make the final decisions on various matters.”

“You’ll see what I mean by observing today’s meeting.” He replied and swiped his ID card to open the door.

The meeting room was already occupied and the scientists inside were having a lively debate, but the voices fell silent almost immediately when Father walked into the room with Nora trailing behind him

“Why is she here?” Dr. Holdern asked. His pale face was fixed into a scowl.

An unfamiliar woman, a blond with a round face and tired eyes, who Nora assumed was Ayo’s replacement, pursed her lips in distaste but said nothing. Dr. Filmore sat to her left and looked apprehensive but gave Nora a small smile. While Dr. Li gave her a curt nod; her true feelings were masterfully hidden behind her usual hawkish expression.

“Dr. Holdren. Nora has agreed to join us once again.” Father replied firmly. For a man in declining health, his voice still held a no-nonsense tone. “I invited her to sit in on our directorate meeting for today so she can get a clearer picture of what the Institute is dealing with.”
“I can’t believe you’d let a murderer back into our folds.” The blond woman said who Nora deduced was Dr. Secord.

“I can’t believe you’d let a known creep and rapist work with you.” Nora countered back.

Dr. Secord scoffed but Father interrupted. “Mother, since Dr. Binet is conscientiously objecting to attending this meeting, why don’t you sit in his seat so we can get started.”

Nora walked passed Dr. Holdren and Dr. Secord and took a seat next to Dr. Li. The woman’s steely gaze remained fixed on the other scientists but Nora heard her murmur quietly.

“Welcome back, Nora.”

Nora nodded in return but said nothing. She felt like this was all a bad dream; it was becoming too real. She was back in the Institute and the finality of that statement shot her anxiety up to eleven.

Father cleared his throat and sat across from them. “As I mentioned at our last meeting, we are meeting here to discuss the Institute’s current power usage and to set up a team to continue work on our Phase 3 plan.”

“What’s Phase 3?” Nora asked.

“Phase 3 is the Institute’s plan to gather more power to indefinitely sustain our facility and any future expansions.” Father explained, “At first glance, the Institute looks to be fully operational but we’ve had to make substantial cut backs and sacrifices to project an image of strength to the outside world. But, we need more power, and I’m not talking about some abstract concept of control, I’m talking about tangible power. Electricity and nuclear fusion. The kind of power that keeps the lights on.”

“We are in the process of activating a nuclear reactor. It is powerful enough to power the Institute for over one thousand years.” Dr. Filmore interjected.

“But first, we need to acquire a device that will help jump start the nuclear reactor.” Father explained. “Dr. Li and Dr. Filmore have collaborated on this project for the past five years and their efforts are finally paying off as we are very close to securing the one thing to ensure the Institute’s future prosperity. But there’s one catch.”

Of course there is. Nora thought.

Father continued, “In order to acquire it, we need to send operatives topside. That was usually a job we reserved for Kellogg or one of our Coursers, but since the Courser program has been disbanded, I am asking that you oversee a team remotely.”

Father’s level gaze met Nora’s and she remembered seeing the same look on his face when Dr. Ayo suggested that she work as their Courser in the first place. His eyes were emotionless and calculating.

“What do you mean?

“You will not be allowed to go above ground to assist in this mission, but you will provide intel and information via a radio and a visual feed that will be worn by whomever you choose to embark on this mission. You may choose any current synth or scientist who is willing and is combat trained to recover the device that we need.” Father replied. His voice was steely and stern.

“Why can’t I go with them?” Nora retorted. “I worked as your Courser for nearly five months!”
“And you almost died because of it.” Father snapped. He sighed weakly and tried to regain his composure. “We have to look at this pragmatically. You are not expendable, Nora. And I will not put my mother in harm’s way again. I can’t. You’re too valuable.”

Nora bit her tongue to keep herself from lashing out. In the back of her mind, she knew her son was right, but her pride wasn’t going to let her admit that out loud.

“Can I have twenty-four hours to think on it? I will have a list of names for you by then.” Nora said slowly and deliberately. The words tasted like acid as they left her mouth, but she didn’t have any other choice.

Father nodded, seemingly satisfied with Nora’s improved self-control, “I appreciate your cooperation, Mother.”

He cleared his throat and straightened up in his chair. “Now, the second order of business to discuss is more of a formality than anything. As all of you know, I’ve been under Dr. Volkert’s care for a while now, but every experimental treatment we could devise has been unsuccessful. My prognosis has been shortened even more than it already was.”

Dr. Filmore gently patted Father’s hand. “How long?”

At that moment Nora saw true fear in his eyes. “Days. A week if I’m lucky. The cancer is incredibly aggressive and I’ve already finalized my end-of-life plans for when the time comes.”

Father swallowed thickly and Nora saw him haphazardly brush away tears. At that moment, he no longer looked like the megalomaniacal tyrant that Nora thought he had become. Now, in this moment, he was just like every other person in the world who had to face their own mortality.

He sniffed and regained his composure. “Still, the Institute cannot survive without leadership. The Directorate must continue to govern with the best interests of all in mind. With that being said, I am naming my mother as my successor.”

Nora expected that the group would break out into riotous objection, but everybody was silent. Dr. Filmore looked uncertain while Dr. Li looked secretly hopeful. The other two doctors, however, looked at her like she had grown a second head.

“You can’t be serious.” Dr. Secord’s shrill voice broke the silence. “She’s a murderer! You said it yourself. You locked her up! Why would you allow —“

“That’s enough.” Father snapped. Nora noticed that he didn’t need to raise his voice for Dr. Secord to retreat back in her chair like a scolded child. “Ignoring your borderline-insubordinate tone, the Institute has enough scientists. What it needs is a leader.”

Dr. Secord’s thin lips pursed disdainfully when she looked at Nora but she held her tongue. Nobody else dared say another word, and Nora was grateful for that. She was getting tired of defending her actions to everyone.

Father rose to his feet. Nora could see his legs trembling to support his weight, and Dr. Filmore jumped to her feet to assist but he waved her away. “I will make the announcement tomorrow and we will assemble again to vote. In the meantime, if you have any questions or grievances then air them now, otherwise this meeting is concluded. Thank you.”

Nora watched her son exit the room slowly and deliberately. She saw synth Nate met him in the hallway and gently helped him towards his private room. Her gaze fell, not wanting to make eye contact with her synth-cloned husband, and when she looked up he was gone.
Once the hallway was clear, Dr. Secord and Dr. Holdren departed without a word. Neither spared a glance at Nora and she wondered how it would ever be possible to get those two on her side.

“Nora, I know you’re in the process of settling in again, but I’d like to meet you in my office in an hour or so. I can start briefing you on the particulars of Phase 3 so you can make an informed decision when it comes to assembling your team for tomorrow.” Dr. Li said.

“Okay.” Nora’s voice wavered. “But —“

Dr. Li held up her hand. “I’ll answer all of your questions during that meeting. I have to get back to my office.”

When Dr. Li left, Nora was left with Dr. Filmore who cleared her throat and rose from her chair. Nora didn’t make eye contact with the woman. Besides Father, out of all the scientists there, she was the one who saw her at her worst. She was the woman who confiscated her hoarded pill collection and the leftover red wine from Ayo’s late night visit. Nora knew with certainty that she would be dead if it wasn’t for Dr. Filmore’s actions. She felt embarrassment and ashamed that her mental health had deteriorated so far that she was desperate enough make contingency plans, but she also felt unbridled gratitude. For better or for worse, Dr. Filmore saved her life that night.

With Dr. Filmore gone, Nora was left alone in the conference room. She slipped her hand into her front pocket and felt the small holotype cartridge that Liam had given her, and she suddenly knew what she needed to do.

It took Nora nearly fifteen minutes to work up the courage to approach the orange and silver door that was marked “Binet” in white letters. Finally she gritted her teeth and knocked on the door.

“Dr. Binet?”

“Go away.” Although his voice was muffled, she could detect the edge that came with those words.

“Please. Can I talk to you? It’s about Liam.” There was a pregnant pause and Nora wondered if he had heard her, but then the door slid open and Dr. Binet stood before her with his arms crossed.

The man looked even worse up close. His thin hair was disheveled and greasy and the thick blond-grey stubble on his face aged him by ten years. He was wearing a long blue evening robe and loose doctor’s scrubs.

“How dare you show your face here after what happened to my son.” Dr. Binet snarled. “Is this some sick game to you?”

“Dr. Binet, you have every right to be angry with me. I know that Liam was caught after he helped rescue me and those synths. I also know about the trial and about how Father made an example out of him publicly. I know that he was banished to the wasteland, and I’m sure you think that he must be dead but --”

“-- Of course he’s dead!” Dr. Binet cried, “My son has no immunities to the radiation that’s out there. He doesn’t know how to fight and he’s unarmed --”

“-- and he’s alive.” Nora finished. “I know it’s hard to believe. Hell, it’s probably sounds too good to believe, but it’s true. I have proof.”

Nora pulled out the holotape that Liam had given her before she left Sanctuary and held it out to his father.
“He recorded this for you when I last saw him. He knew you’d be worried about him.” She replied.

Dr. Binet looked at the holotape as though Nora was holding out an alien artifact, but he took the tape and retreated into the living room leaving Nora alone in the doorway.

She tentatively stepped farther into their dwelling and the door automatically closed behind her. The Binet residence was small, considering that it only housed a family of three, but it was clean and full of scientific implements, and of course, two different chess boards.

Nora saw Liam’s bedroom off to her right. An assortment of children’s toys were stored in a box beneath a computer desk. His small bed was neatly made and his night stand held a lamp and a leather bound journal.

An olive skinned woman stepped into the living room and cleared her throat shyly. “Alan, what is that?”

“We’ll see in a moment, Eve.” His voice wasn’t cruel and there was a hint of patient affection in his tone.

He plugged the large holotape player into the wall and then popped open the lid. He inserted the small cassette into it with trembling hands, closed the lid, and pressed play.

Liam cleared his throat in the recording and then she heard his voice ring out clearly and confidently.

_This is a recording to my father Dr. Alan Binet and my synth mother, Eve. The date is December 5th and it’s currently a little after six in the evening._

Dr. Binet looked at Nora. Disbelief and euphoria fought for dominance over his features. She smiled gently, almost encouragingly. No matter what happened with her or with the Directorate, Nora was proud that she could at least bring closure to Liam’s family.

Liam’s voice continued in the recording and Dr. Binet turned back to the player. Eve walked to his side and Nora saw that Dr. Binet held out his hand to her which she gently received.

_Dad and Eve, If you are listening to this, then that means Nora has come through for me like I knew she would. Please understand that she’s sacrificed a lot to get this to you both._

_I’m not going to apologize for what I did. Even now, as I’m sitting in the middle of the so-called hellish wasteland, I am proud of what I managed to do. But I am ashamed that my choices hurt you both. I hope that Father hasn’t come down on either of you for my actions, and Dad, I hope that someday you can forgive me._

_My exile to the world outside of the Institute’s secure walls was meant to be a punishment, but I’m finding out that it was actually a gift. I have learned and grown so much in this short time, and thanks to Nora, I’m living safe and sound in her old community. I’ve made some friends, I’m learning a lot of practical skills, and I’m collecting a ton of Pre War artifacts for you both to experiment with if we ever are fortunate to meet again._

Dr. Binet chuckled and he brushed away the tears that were sliding down his cheeks. Eve looked at Nora and mouthed “thank you.”

_But Nora needs your help, Dad. She needs your support if she’s going to reform the Institute’s ways. I owe my life to her and her friends. Without them, I would’ve been lost in this wasteland._
Nora is the Institute’s only hope for redemption. Despite what Father has put her through, she believes there is still goodness there, as do I.

I love you both.

The recording cut out. Dr. Binet’s shoulders heaved. Eve dabbed at her eyes with tissues and Nora suddenly felt like she was intruding on their private moment.

She slowly backed out of the room, but before the door closed she heard Dr. Binet call out, “Nora, wait!”

The man crossed through the small apartment in several strides and scooped her up into a great big hug.

“Thank you.” He whispered in her ear. “My son would’ve been lost without you.”

When the hour was up, Nora wandered through the atrium like a wraith. People paid no attention to her; synths didn’t make eye contact and scientists would abruptly walk away as she passed by.

Even when she walked through the doors that led to Advanced Systems, she was surprised and slightly disappointed to find the area empty.

“Hello?” She called out.

Dr. Li emerged from her office with her arms folded across her chest. “Thanks for coming, Nora.”

“Where is everyone?”

“I sent them down to the commissary to eat. I figured that would give us some time to talk in private. How are you doing?”

“Um. I don’t know.” And that was the truth, she realized.

Dr. Li nodded. “To be honest, I never thought you’d be back here.”

“I didn’t either. It took a lot for me to … recover from last time.” Nora replied quietly. “I thought I’d never see this place again. Hell, I hoped that I wouldn’t, but then things changed. I hope I’m not too naive to think that my son has changed too.”

“Shaun’s diagnosis has rattled him.” Dr. Li replied. “You didn’t know him as a young man, but according to many, he thought that he was infallible, untouchable. That ego and fearlessness has led to him to do some great things but also some terrible ones. I’m sorry how everything ended Nora. With Ayo, with Father’s harsh treatment of you, with young Liam—”

“— Liam’s doing great up top. I think he’s already forgiven and forgotten, but I can’t. At least not yet.”

Dr. Li nodded. “We all regret what happened in your last few days with us. I know I do.”

“But you didn’t do anything.” Nora countered.

“Didn’t I?” Dr. Li replied. “I asked you to risk your life for a personal favor. When you miraculously came through for me, I stood by in silence as Father exacted unfair justice. I never assumed that Ayo would follow through with his predilections, and so I never brought up disgusting behavior to anyone because I assumed that you’d be able to take care of yourself. I ——“
Nora waved her hand at Dr. Li as though she was swatting the woman’s guilt away. “None of that was your fault.”

“Standing by as something evil happens still makes me complicit.” Dr. Li countered. “I’m tired of standing by. I’m sorry about everything Nora, and I want to help you any way that I can. When you take over as Director, you need informed advisors to fill you in on the day-to-day routines as well as the science behind it all. I would like to help if I can.”

“I appreciate that.” Nora replied.

“Is Dr. Virgil alright? In the wasteland, I mean?” Nora noticed the eagerness in Dr. Li’s voice.

“Yes. It’s a miracle, really. He somehow walked from The Glowing Sea all the way to my old neighborhood in Sanctuary Hills. He was still pretty banged up when we met, but the serum worked. He’s human again and last I heard he’s in Goodneighbor working with the local doctor.”

Dr. Li nodded. “That’s good to hear.”

“He’s in good hands there. Dr. Amari is a neuroscientist and she’s one of the most respected women in the Commonwealth.”

“She?” Dr. Li’s eyebrows rose minutely and Nora thought she saw a hint of jealousy on the woman’s face. But her expression immediately morphed back to her neutral aloof indifference and she pursed her lips. “I’m just thankful to hear that he’s safe and is doing well. Anyway…I’m sure you’re curious about why I called this meeting.”

“To brief me about Phase 3.”

“No. That was a lie. There will be time to fill you in on the particulars of Phase 3 later. The things that I’m about to tell you are things that nobody knows about — including Dr. Filmore. I want to talk to you about the Brotherhood of Steel.”

“Shaun has already told me about the Brotherhood. I know they’re our greatest threat right now and —“

Dr. Li shook her head. “Nora, do you know why the Brotherhood is even here at all?”

Nora shrugged, “I’ve heard rumors and whisperings. Apparently, they fled from the Capital Wasteland.”

Dr. Li nodded. “The Brotherhood of Steel are here for the very same reason that I am. We’re refugees.” Dr. Li replied. “But you need to understand the full story. This may take some time, so please get comfortable.”

Nora took a seat on a plush grey chair while Dr. Li settled into her orange and chrome office chair.

She spoke in a calm voice as though she had rehearsed the speech ahead of time. “Nearly thirty years ago, I began my career as a scientist working in a lab on an old aircraft hanger. The city that had sprung up from the ruins was called Rivet City and it was my home. I was born there. I grew up there. I fell in love there…”

Dr. Li’s voice faltered only for a moment and she continued, “Two of my colleagues discovered that they were expecting a child. The three of us: James, Catherine, and I were working on a top secret project to help the Capital Wasteland purify their main water source. This was James’s brainchild, and I -- being the more mechanically minded of the team -- started researching ways we
could convert the water filtration systems used in vaults and modify it to work on a massive scale. The Brotherhood of Steel, led by Elder Lyons, was integral in getting this project off the ground.”

“But when Catherine went into labor, everything changed. She died in childbirth and James was never the same. Catherine wasn’t dead a week and James stole the infant away in the night. He left without a word and I was left holding the bag. The Brotherhood abandoned the project and me with it. I spent the next eighteen years of my life outfitting Rivet City with as much medical technology and resources as I could invent. Eventually, I served on its own Board of Directors. I did as much work as I could with Project Purity with my remaining crew of scientists, but it was never enough.”

“Then one night, James waltzes back into my lab and he suggests that we start Project Purity back up again. My response was less than dignified, to say the least, and he was forced to move on. But I couldn’t get the idea out of my head, so I went to the Jefferson Memorial and started up Project Purity once again. The process was agonizingly slow considering the danger involved, but I was obsessed. I couldn’t let it go.”

“By now, James’s daughter was a grown woman. When she sought me out, I thought that her mother was walking back into my office. The two looked nearly identical that I wondered if she was actually one of the android experiments that I was beginning to hear so much about.” Dr. Li’s thin lips pursed into a wry smile.

“I expected that she’d be like her father -- flighty, impulsive, but good at heart -- but she turned out to be a monster.”

Nora’s intrigued expression grew into unease as Dr. Li continued, “I first heard word of her atrocities when the Galaxy News Radio reported that she had detonated a nuclear bomb in the center of Megaton killing thousands of people. She traversed the Capital Wasteland killing anything and everything that got in her path. With each passing day, the reports grew more and more frequent until the reports stopped altogether. The silence that fell over the radio told us all that we needed to know.”

“Once the Brotherhood realized that they had a threat on their hands far bigger than the Super Mutant menace, they banded together with the surviving settlements to make one final stand against the Enclave and against her.”

“What’s the Enclave?” Nora asked.

“They are the remnants of the old Pre-War American government. Their leader, John Henry Eden, considers himself the de-facto President and spouts his pro-unity propaganda with the help of his eyebots. Apparently his message was powerful enough to sway James’s daughter to his side, because when the dust settled in the fight, the Enclave had won. James, Elder Lyons, and his daughter Sarah Lyons were all dead. But the worst part of it all was that our project ... my work was used to weaponize the FEV virus. Instead of purifying the Potomac River, the purifier injected the FEV into the water thereby killing anyone who drank from it.”

“And that’s what drove the Brotherhood here?” Nora replied. Suddenly the puzzle pieces were falling into place. She understood Carrington’s fear and Desdemona’s haunting eyes as she kept a constant night vigil to protect her family. She understood Nick’s initial fear as the large airship crossed through the sky. Her stomach churned as the gravity of her situation settled on her shoulders.

“So they think the Institute is another group like the Enclave?” Nora clarified. “That’s why they’re a threat.”
Dr. Li looked into Nora’s eyes. “They’re not just a threat to us. They’re a threat to you, Nora.”

“Me? Why?”

“When Shaun dies and when you take over, they will see you as the leader. You’re a former Vault Dweller. You’ve worked for the Institute — albeit under duress — and you’re suddenly catapulted into a position of power. Nora, the Brotherhood thinks that you’re the scourge of the Capital Wasteland reborn.”

It took her a moment to let that information sink in but when it did, Nora knew one undeniable fact: she made a terrible mistake coming back to the Institute.
The Death of a Tyrant

Chapter 21 - The Death of a Tyrant

The next day, Nora gave Father a short list of people who she thought would be capable of infiltrating the Mass Fusion building to obtain the beryllium agitator.

Her first choice was Nate, or N1-08 as she learned, and he accepted her nomination without protest. Her second choice was Dr. Filmore as she knew the most about the interior of the Mass Fusion building, and they’d need an experienced scientist in the mix to transport the chemical safely once they reached the main reactor. Allie agreed without reservation and began making preparations right away. However, her third choice’s response was tepid.

She nominated X6-88.

“I will only follow you when you are the Director and I have no choice,” he replied as he swept the pine needles and leaves off the sidewalk and back into the meticulously landscaped arboretum. His silent dismissal was a form of defiance, Nora noted. He could pretend to be disinterested as much as he wanted, but Nora could see the hunger that was there.

Ever since Father disbanded the Courser program, the synths who were trained to be emotionless killers were demoted into service and maintenance jobs. Dr. Binet told her that the alternative would be to deactivate them, do a complete memory wipe, and retain their bodies until they were needed to step in to replace a defective Gen-2. Some went down fighting but they soon knew the irony of being on the receiving end of their factory reset code. X6 was one of the few who chose to voluntarily retire to keep his identity.

Still, she knew that X6 was a capable fighter and could handle himself against a swarm of enemies. Although he had the personality of a wet blanket, she knew that X6 would do everything he could
to complete the mission. His loyalty to the Institute coupled with Allie’s know-how, and Nate’s combat instincts would nicely round out the team.

When she gave the list to Father in his private quarters, he looked it over and set it on his nightstand. His watery eyes were pale and dull, and the skin around his face was beginning to sink in, creating a skeletal appearance.

“Have they all agreed?” He wheezed.

“All except X6. He refuses to follow me until I am formally named the Director.” Nora replied.

“Well, he won’t have to wait long.” Father groused and then coughed weakly. “Thank you, Mother.”

The implied dismissal in his voice hurt. “Shaun, can I do anything for you? Anything at all?”

Her son sighed weakly. “No, mother. All I need to do now is rest. I will see you tomorrow for our briefing.”

The next three days passed by in the blink of an eye. When she wasn’t being briefed on the various tasks she’d be responsible for once she became Director, she was working with Dr. Binet and Dr. Li.

She spent her mornings with Dr. Li. The woman was diligent in teaching Nora everything about Phase 3, right down to the science that went into nuclear fusion. By the end of their meetings, Nora was nursing a dull headache. Whereas, her time with Dr. Binet in the afternoons was spent discussing more philosophical matters that centered around the morality of synth creation. The topic was far more accessible and it stoked Nora’s argumentative nature.

Nora had gone to Dr. Binet’s lab to watch the synth creation process again. As the mechanical arm etched the muscles, nerves, ligaments, and veins onto a human skeleton, Nora couldn’t help but think of synth Nate.

Dr. Binet gestured towards the four pools of flesh-colored liquid. He spoke as though he was giving a college lecture, and despite finding all of this information overwhelming, Nora listened with rapt attention.

“Each synth is born with the physiological responses to survive but their memories won’t get transferred until they are taken in for processing.” He said.

A dark-skinned woman rose out of one, naked and bald, and walked over to an Institute scientist for inspection. The scientist took measurements of her head circumference, body fat, muscle tone, and body weight, and diligently recorded the data on a clipboard.

“How many synths do you create in a week?” Nora asked.

“No.” Dr. Binet replied. “Like a new infant that is born into the world, these synths are still taking in their surroundings. They don’t know to be afraid. They don’t know what happiness should feel like, or satisfaction, or hunger, or sadness. All of that is learned during processing.”

The newly created woman felt her bald head. Her wide mouth broke into a brilliant smile and she began walking towards the door that said “Processing” in bold red letters.

“How many synths do you create in a week?”
Dr. Binet frowned as he did the mental calculations. “I’d estimate that we create between eight to ten new Gen-3 synths a week. Our Gen-2 line has outlived their usefulness; breakdowns, malfunctions, and system corruptions are happening with more and more frequency. So we’ve bumped up our numbers slightly to replace our Gen-2 workers with Gen-3s.” Dr. Binet paused and a sad smirk pulled at his lips. “Of course, my son’s involvement with the steady leak of synths topside has had an effect too.”

“So, you’re working on a supply and demand model for human creation and you don’t see anything wrong with that?” Nora asked.

She often took moments like this to engage Dr. Binet in a verbal sparring match. Unlike her discussions with her son, or even with Hancock, she could debate with the scientist without getting worked up...most of the time.

Dr. Binet sighed, “Nora, your criticism is the very thing I wrestle with every day, but the Institute has needs. We need synths to run the day-to-day facilities so our scientists can work. We’ve made more scientific breakthroughs in the last generation than we have in the last one hundred years, thanks to these synths.”

“But they didn’t ask to be created.” She countered.

“Nobody asks to be created or born.” Dr. Binet replied. “But when it happens, the person or the synth in question is often there to fill a role that is needed. When my late wife and I decided to have a child, we did so knowing that our child would step into my role once I was too old. Of course, things happen along the way that may impact the original goal, but the motivation is still the same.”

“If Liam would’ve told you that he didn’t want to take over your job here, would you have listened?” Nora asked.

Dr. Binet frowned at the strange question, “I don’t know. He’s been helping me in the lab here ever since he could walk. I don’t think he’d be suited for any other job, at least not without someone mentoring him.”

“But Liam is now thriving in a world far different than what you had planned for him.” Nora replied. “My son is the leader of the most technologically advanced organization in the Commonwealth, and I wanted him to grow up and become a lawyer. Both of our plans for our children were derailed.”

“You’re tap-dancing around something here.” Dr. Binet pointed out.

“It’s this.” Nora replied. “What if a synth, once created, was given a choice: work with the Institute or be set free?”

Dr. Binet shook his head. “Nora, I know this is hard for you to understand, but setting synths free in the wasteland is far less humane than keeping them here with us. I would’ve told Liam that if I discovered his plans sooner. With everything that’s our there, sending them topside without the tools, know-how, and capacity to survive is nothing short of murder.”

“What if you required synths to pass a series of physical and mental tests? I agree that if they are not physically and mentally capable of handling themselves in a potential combat situation, then sending them topside would be like leading a lamb to slaughter, but giving them an option is better than forced imprisonment and slavery!”
Dr. Binet noted that Nora was no longer just talking about Gen-3 synths. “Nora, your situation with
Ayo wasn’t an option, it was coercion. Everyone knew that. I just don’t see how this would
provide a better alternative for the synths. Sending them into danger willfully is more immoral than
keeping them here. If they are here with us, at least they are safe.”

As Dr. Binet walked away, an idea popped into Nora’s head and her mouth opened before she
could stop herself.

“What if I could bring you proof?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“What if I could bring a synth back here to meet with you and those synths interested in going
topside to explain what life is like outside of the Institute? Then the synths can make the choice
themselves.” Nora asked. She spoke quickly, hoping that her presumptuous plan wasn’t going to
blow up in her face.

“And who did you have in mind?”

“You created her seven years ago. Her designation back then was G7-81 but I know her as Glory.”
Nora replied. “If Glory can survive in the wasteland for seven years, then perhaps she can help
synths who want to leave get established in the wasteland. And this isn’t a one off thing, by the
way. If they don’t like it out there, they can come back.”

Dr. Binet considered Nora’s suggestion. “Something of this caliber can’t be decided by just me,
Nora. Are you confident enough in this idea to bring it in front of the Directorate at our meeting
next week?”

“Will you be there this time?” Nora asked.

“I can let bygones be bygones long enough to set aside my hatred for Father to voice my support.”
Dr. Binet said. “But you need to introduce this as your idea. If it came from me, the other division
heads would shoot it down quickly. They aren’t pleased with my recent absentee habit.”

“I’ll bring the idea up to Father and the rest of them if you agree to voice your support.” Nora
replied.

Dr. Binet considered her words and nodded. “You should flesh out your plan as best you can.
Aside for Dr. Li, everyone else here has a pretty bleak view of life in the Commonwealth. You’ll
need to convince everyone that we’re not sending synths out to be slaughtered.”

Nora thought of her terminal in her private quarters. Now that it was set up to contact Piper and
Desdemona, she hoped that she could get some outside support.

“I’ll do my best.” Nora promised.

“You may disagree with this, but a leadership role like this looks good on you Nora.” Dr. Binet
replied.

“Thanks.” Nora murmured, but her fear wasn’t convincing the Directorate or even Desdemona that
this would be a good idea. No, the hurdle would be to convince her son.

“Absolutely not.” Father wheezed in response to Nora’s pitch.
After a day of planning and communicating with The Railroad via the augmented computer terminal in her residence, Nora had gotten Desdemona’s approval under the condition that another agent accompany Glory to the Institute to ensure her safety.

“Shaun, please —” Nora pleaded.

“My title is Father and you will call me by it mother.” He pounded his fist weakly on the armrest of his wheelchair.

Father became wheelchair bound the day after Nora’s first Directorate meeting. The cancer was spreading rapidly and his health deteriorated quickly. His lungs were no longer strong enough for him to walk on his own, and the brain tumor was beginning to interfere with his cognitive functions; the man often found himself in a room with no recollection as to why he was there, and then one night he awoke and couldn’t remember his own name.

Seeing their leader’s weakness, scientists were beginning to defer to Nora’s judgement on smaller matters. Dr. Li and Dr. Binet had fully acknowledged Nora as their new Director, much to her son’s ire. Even Dr. Holdren was coming around. He asked Nora to visit his laboratory one evening. At first she expected him to berate her limited knowledge in botany, biology, and chemistry, but he patiently explained the variety of experiments that his team was conducting.

“Father,” Nora tried again. “The synth creation process is immoral and unethical, especially if you force them to work as glorified slaves without allowing them a chance to exercise their free will. I am not proposing that we throw these synths into the wasteland unprepared, but many are interested in seeing what life is like outside of the Institute’s walls.”

“Life is Hell outside of these walls.” Father replied. “You and Dr. Li both know that. And you would agree to set them free? To let them roam the wasteland just because they want to? Synths do not want Mother, no matter what your misguided freedom fighting group wants you to believe.

Nora shook her head in frustration. This was the same old tired spiel that she had to listen to when she worked as their Courser. Father couldn’t be reasoned with and she wondered whether the brief glimpse of humanity that her son demonstrated on the CIT rooftop was actually genuine.

“Father. When we spoke on the CIT rooftop, you told me that you’d let me run the Institute how I saw fit. I told you this was coming.” Nora spoke evenly. She did her best to keep her frustration and anger out of her voice. She pulled every lawyer tactic she knew to negotiate for a better plea deal for these synths. “You replied, ‘and here I thought you didn’t want the job.’ Do you remember that?”

“Yes.” Father replied tersely.

“And now that I’m putting that plan into motion, you’re pushing back. I don’t understand why.” Nora replied.

Father held up his head to look Nora straight in the eyes. His head trembled as his body struggled to do this one, small physical function.

“Because I will not see my work thrown out into the wasteland like common trash.” Father replied. “I named you my successor, but as long as I am breathing, I am still the Director. You can go forward with your ludicrous plan after I’m dead, but I would hope that the directorate councils you to see reason because you’ve obviously have taken leave of your senses.”

“Father —”
He raised up a gnarled hand to stop her. “My decision is final, mother. This conversation will be tabled to be discussed at a later date. Preferably for a date at which I will no longer be here to listen to this nonsense.”

The door opened and Nate stepped in. His appearance was striking. His dark hair was beginning to grow out of the buzz cut it had been in and now inch and a half long strands stuck out unruly and tousled from the top of his head. He didn’t make eye contact with Nora but she watched as he wheeled their son … no, her son back to his room.

“That concludes this meeting.” Nora replied to the room with a hollow voice. The group dispersed without a word or a meaningful glance back in her direction.

She stood in the directorate meeting room alone for a solid ten minutes. She tried to rack her brain for another angle to take to convince Father that this idea was not only sound but morally necessary for the Institute’s future, but all she could think about was the messy dark hair that sat atop synth Nate’s head. It was the same hairstyle that Nora fussed over with a comb and hair tonic the day the bombs fell. As the days passed, synth Nate was beginning to look more and more like her husband and less like the imposter she saw him as.

Nora cleared away the lump that was forming in her throat and she noticed that her hands were trembling. Every day, Nora saw Nate wheeling Shaun to and from his doctor’s appointments. He’d attend to him with genuine paternal care. He had the same look of unconditional love in his eyes now as he did when he cooed and snuggled Shaun when he fussed and cried at night.

Seeing Nate here with their son was a sort of poetic justice. Although they didn’t make it out of the vault as a family, they were still together in some form. But the line she had drawn in her mind — the line that separated her husband’s memories and legacy with the existence of a synthetic clone, a complete stranger — well, that line was beginning to blur.

Two days later, Father’s words became truth. Dr. Filmore burst into the Advanced Systems laboratory. Her eyes were puffy and bloodshot and her face was nearly translucent. Nora was pouring over blueprints of the Mass Fusion building that Dr. Li had spread across a vacant desk. When she saw the woman enter and her heart plummeted to the floor.

“Allie?” Dr. Li asked gently. The woman didn’t need to finish her question. Allie latched onto her like they were magnetized and sobbed into the woman’s shoulder.

“It’s Father.” The words tore from her throat like they had been ripped out.

Dr. Li held the sobbing woman and then nodded to Nora. “Go on, Nora. I’ll take care of Allie.”

Nora didn’t remember the walk to her son’s private quarters, but when she arrived, two synths were standing guard outside his door. She expected to see Nate somewhere, but she assumed that he was already inside. As soon as the synths saw her, they parted and allowed her to pass through the doorway.

When she entered an unnatural silence filled the room. It was as though the walls themselves were holding a moment of silence for her son. The room smelled stale and she could also smell the slight odor of blood and decay.

Her son was lying in a hospital bed. The blue hospital gown that he wore underneath a grey argyle robe made his skin look nearly translucent. The lights in the room were dim but not altogether dark. Nora noticed that Nate was nowhere to be found and that worried her.
Each heavy-footed step she took towards his bedside echoed in her ears like thunderclaps. Her hands trembled fiercely and so she stuffed them in her pockets.

“Mother.” He whispered weakly. His eyes were glassy and unfocused; his skin was coarse and dry and little specks of blood stained his mouth.

Nora bit her lip. During the week of her imprisonment in the Institute’s makeshift jail cell, Nora fantasized that she’d be able to exact her revenge on her son for the injustice she suffered at his hands. But seeing him here, helpless and vulnerable, quenched any rage that was still simmering. The lump forming in her throat burned painfully and it kept her from saying anything. Fat tears dripped down her cheeks but she let them fall to the pristine tiled floor.

He opened his hand, palm up, and Nora saw it as an invitation. Her trembling fingers ghosted over his skin and then their palms met. Father sighed contently when their skin touched. His own skin was clammy and ice cold. He felt just like Nate’s frigid skin did when she and Preston had pulled him out of the vault.

“Where’s Nate? He should be here with you too.” Nora croaked.

Father cleared his throat, but it was no use. His voice still came out as a faint whisper. “H-He didn’t wish to be here, and even I can’t force anyone to be at my deathbed.” He let out a weak cough that was meant to be a laugh.

“Well he should be here!” Nora urged. “I can have someone call for him or —“

“Mother, please.” Father rasped. “Allow me this one indulgence. Besides, he’s far more useful running security than babysitting me.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Nora interjected but Father cut in.

His hand shook as he patted hers reassuringly. “Mother, many people in the Commonwealth will see this day as a celebration. I’ve asked that my death be kept confidential and off the record, but of course that means that everyone will find out about it somehow. Information leaks out of the Institute from time to time and our enemies will look at this as an opportunity to strike. N1-08 is more useful running security in case in-fighting breaks out. The transfer of power needs to be seamless. Besides, as selfish as it is, I only wanted you to be at my side for this. It seemed right.”

“Do you want to know the first thought that crossed my mind when you were born?” Nora asked but she continued without waiting for a response. “When the doctors handed me you, I thought that I was going to screw you up somehow, but I also told you that I’d fight for you. No matter what happened to us in our lives, I’d fight for you. You yawned and then smiled at me. That was one of the few smiles you gave me, you know, but it meant everything to me.”

“I hope that I wasn’t too much of a disappointment for you.” Father wheezed. “Although, you may not believe it, I too fight for my family here. I fight for my colleagues, their families, and the synths, because the world is dangerous and I want to protect them from that danger.”

Nora nodded and ran her thumb along his bony knuckles. “Shaun, I’m sorry about what happened when I left last time. About telling you that I should’ve had an abortion and for calling you a mistake. I was speaking in anger. I felt betrayed and lonely, and Ayo’s abuse just —“

“Never apologize for him, Mother.” Father’s watery eyes focused in on her. “Moving Ayo into a position of power was a mistake. I, too, regret my actions in that incident. If I had been more sensitive to your needs, then perhaps young Liam wouldn’t have felt the need to endanger your life
and the lives of several synths.”

Nora bit her tongue. She wouldn’t argue with her son, not on his deathbed, so she simply nodded.

Father sighed, “I guess we can’t prolong the inevitable.” He pressed a button on the armrest of his hospital bed.

“What can I do for you Director?” The man’s voice asked through the intercom near the bedside. Nora recognized Dr. Volkert’s voice.

“I am ready for the medication, Doctor.” Father replied softly.

“As you wish, Father.” Dr. Volkert replied. “Please excuse my sentimentality but I just want to say that it’s been a pleasure working with you.”

“Likewise, Dean. Likewise.” Father wheezed. When he moved his hand away from the keypad, Nora saw that a clear substance was being fed into his other hand intravenously.

“What is that?” Nora asked, but deep in her heart, she knew the answer.

“I’m taking control of my destiny, Mother. In five minutes, this medication will put me to sleep. In three more minutes, it will stop my heart. The process is entirely painless and dignified.”

Suicide. The word sloshed through her mind like a deluge of ice cold water. Her son was choosing death, not succumbing to it naturally, and that was the straw that broke her; she sobbed and nearly fell into the chair that was at his bedside. She grasped his hand harder and she could feel the claw-like bones beneath his thin skin.

“Shaun, why…” But the words died on her lips when he shook his head. His face held a look of determination and conviction; this man of science would die on his own accord thanks to medical intervention. He wouldn’t succumb to cancer and whither away any more than his dignity would allow.

“I - I’m sorry, Shaun.” She stuttered and wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry that we never got along. You know, it took your fucking illness for us to sit down and talk again. Hell, I don’t think we can go a full day without arguing with each other.”

Father coughed and winced. His voice was weaker as he spoke, “You know, our tumultuous relationship isn’t uncommon. Many mothers and sons don’t get along.” He had a slight sardonic grin that transformed into a drowsy smile.

That struck a chord with her and she bit her lip to stop the raw sob that threatened to tear from her throat.

“I love you, Shaun.” She choked out. She grasped his hand with both of hers and placed her forehead to their clasped hands. “Dammit. I -- I just thought I made a mess of everything. I never thought I was good enough for you. I was a shitty mother and I blamed you for what happened. I blamed you for everything -- Nate’s death, my depression -- but I was wrong. I’m so so sorry.”

“I have regrets too Mother, but reuniting with you isn’t one of them.” Father’s voice was becoming slurred as the medication was taking effect. “I care about everyone here. Please know that. I —”

His eyes fluttered and his head rested heavily on the pillow. Nora bit her lip hard enough that she could taste blood. But then her son caught her gaze once more.
“Thank you for giving me this life.” He breathed out. “I—”

He faltered and Nora saw that his tongue and lips were scarlet; the bleeding was getting worse.

After a moment’s hesitation, he said. “I—I think I’d like to sleep now.”

Her son closed his eyes and the tension and pain in his face began to melt away.

“Shaun? Shaun!” Nora whimpered. Her son’s hand fell slack in her hand and she gently placed it back onto the coarse blanket.

His chest rose and fell for another minute until his breathing became imperceptible. Then a minute later his heart rate monitor’s beeping slowed until it flatlined.

She looked once more at her son’s face. Thin wisps of snow white hair stuck out and Nora gently smoothed them down.

“Goodbye Shaun.” She murmured against his forehead and placed her lips to his cold skin.

She didn’t hear the automatic door open, nor did she register Dr. Volkart and his team of doctors as they covered her son with a sheet and gently transferred his body to a gurney.

“Nora.” Dr. Volkert said gently. “He’ll be cremated, per his wishes. Would you like to be present for the process? I find that it gives people much needed closure.”

Nora nodded. Although her son’s face was shrouded in the white sheet, she remembered how her husband looked when they shrouded him in the American Flag and pulled him from the Vault. Past blurred with the present and Nora briefly thought she could make out the crimson and ivory stripes of the Old World on her son’s burial shroud.

She shook her head and tried to dislodge those images from her mind and followed the nurses and doctors who were pushing her son’s body out of his bedroom and into the elevator.

When they all stepped out into the atrium, Nora was astonished to see that every synth and scientist who could be spared was standing along the walls and upper balconies. Their heads were bowed respectfully in mourning of their lost leader. Granted, some people looked relieved, but others -- including Allie Fillmore -- were nearly incapacitated by grief. Small sobs and the occasional mournful wail echoed out in the eerie silence.

As they walked across the atrium towards the Bioscience area, Nora saw Nate standing outside the door with his laser rifle drawn and ready. His eyes flicked from the people, to the synth workers, and then finally to Nora’s blotchy and tear stained face. His jaw clenched and his face was unreadable.

When they entered the Bioscience lab, the nurses took a left and went down a narrow corridor and passed through a set of automatic doors with her son’s body.

Dr. Volkert turned to her and gestured to another door, “If you please, the observation room is this way. The nurses will undress Father and prepare him for cremation. If you have any questions about this process, please don’t hesitate to ask. Now that you are the Director, you are granted access to any and all information about the Institute’s affairs.”

“Can I request something?” Nora asked. She already hated herself for what she was about to say.

“Of course.” He replied.
“Can Nate be present for this too?” Nora asked.

Dr. Volkert spoke into the communicator on his wrist, “N1-08 your presence is requested in the crematorium observation room.”

“Affirmative.” She heard Nate reply over the communicator.

Dr. Volkert gave her a small, comforting smile and led towards the door. “While you wait, please make yourself comfortable.”

The door slid open and Nora stepped into an observation room not unlike the one that she and Shaun sat in while they watched Dr. Binet’s synth demonstration in the Robotics lab.

Two plush armchairs sat next to a coffee table. A small bar was set up on the side filled with bottles of vodka, whiskey, bourbon, and rum. It was also stocked with Nuka Cola and Purified Water for those who abstained from drinking or were too young.

The door slid closed and Nora sank into one of the armchairs. Her skin tingled against the cold sweat that broke out across her neck. She ran her clammy hands through her hair and then rested her forehead against her hands.

A profound sense of loneliness struck her with a pain that stole the breath from her lungs. She was the last Pendleton, the last one of her family, and that truth struck her in a way that no physical wound could. She had made her peace with the fact that she might lose her husband one day, after all that was the nature of his job, but she had never imagined that she’d watch her son die too.

When she emerged from the vault, Nora knew that the chances that Shaun had survived were slim, but she let the slim chance that he was alive drive her on an odyssey through the Commonwealth. In a matter of a year, her son went from a small ray of hope to an all-consuming fire that blinded out everything else in her path. And now that the fire had died, she was left in the cold and empty darkness once again.

“Nora?” Nate’s voice broke her from her thoughts.

Nate looked hesitant, almost weary, and fiddled with rubbed his thumb and forefinger together nervously. Her son had even managed to get her husband’s nervous tic down accurately.

He cleared his throat, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

The words seemed so alien coming from the mouth of a man who looked like her husband. She knew he meant it, but she didn’t feel the same sense of comfort that those words should normally bring.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

“No.” Her voice came out garbled amid the sorrow that choked her throat. Nora crossed the room. Nate watched her warily. He was expecting anything except the vice-grip like hug that she pulled him into.

He stiffened against the contact at first, but then gently wrapped his arms around her shoulders. He held her. He would’ve held her for hours if that would get her to stop crying, but he held her nonetheless as she sobbed in his chest. The wetness from her tears created a damp patch that stuck to his skin.

“I’m sorry Nora.” He murmured into her hair. His lips ghosted the flushed skin above her forehead
and he tapped into all of his self-control to not plant his lips there.

“It’s not fair. You should’ve been there too.” She whispered. But he knew that she wasn’t blaming him; she was lamenting his absence.

“He didn’t want me there.” He replied gently. Nora lifted her head up from his chest and saw how Father’s rejection had torn Nate apart. “He wanted his mother.”

“You’re his father. He’s always wanted you.”

Nora glanced at Nate and saw absolute misery on his face. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“What do we do now?”

“Tomorrow the Directorate will put your nomination to a vote. Since you’ll have the majority’s vote, you’ll be appointed as the new Director immediately afterwords, but for now, the Institute has shut down all non-vital operations until that meeting can take place. That’s tradition, apparently.”

“Nora?” Dr. Volkert said over the intercom. “Everything is prepared. The cremation will begin in sixty seconds.”

“Do you want me to leave?” Nate asked.

“No.” Nora whispered. She held out her hand and allowed Nate’s large, calloused fingers to intertwine with hers.

“I need you here.” She murmured.

The lights in the room dimmed like a macabre movie theater and the room on the other side of the observation glass lit up. Nora saw her son’s body was placed on a stainless steel surgical table. He was naked save for a small blue surgical cloth that covered his genitals, and they watched as a doctor slid her son’s body along a short metal track stopping just before some double doors. The doctor nodded to a synth who was standing nearby and the synth pushed the lever down to open the crematorium’s jaws.

The doctor pushed Shaun’s body into the metal beast and the synth closed the door once more. After a few button pushes on a nearby terminal, the doctor’s face was bathed in a warm orangish-red light as the flames rose up behind the glass window.

Everything was sterile and unemotional. It was so scientific. Dr. Volkert was wrong. Watching this gave her no closure, it only made her feel more empty inside.

After nearly a half hour into her vigil, Dr. Volkert’s voice came back over the intercom. “Nora, the process is just about complete. We will preserve Father’s ashes in the manner that he requested. You should go back to your quarters now. You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow.”

“C’mon, I’ll walk you back.” Nate murmured.

Nora followed Nate through the bright winding hallways and back out into the atrium. Life carried on like normal for the synths and scientists. Synths and scientists wandered the halls, some were
on their way to work, or others were on their way to the commissary, or to the lounges that were situated on the balconies to unwind with an evening cocktail. They all had families and a purpose. Their lives would go on without Father. He would eventually become one more name lost to history.

“Are you okay to be alone?” Nate’s voice pulled her from her thoughts.

They were standing outside the door to her private quarters. Unlike her first room which was smaller and located directly above the SRB, this one held two bedrooms and was located directly above the directorate meeting room. Nora never asked why she was in a two bedroom residence when she was living alone, but she assumed that it was her son’s subtle way to either apologize for his past behavior or to encourage her to fraternize with someone more worthy than a ghoul or an outdated synth.

Nora wanted to laugh. She wanted to deflect his question with humor but knew that he’d see through it immediately.

“No.” She replied quietly.

Nate looked pained, “Well, my shift doesn’t get done for a few more hours yet but I can stop by and check up on you if you want.”

Nora nodded. “Yes, please check on me.”

Her words held no double meaning. One of Dr. Amari’s first suggestions when she was attending to Nora’s overdose was that she ask for help when she needed it, no matter if the timing seemed inconvenient or whether the issue seemed unimportant. Nora was, for once, asking for help.

“Can I get you anything?” Nate asked. “I remember that you used to read those trashy Love & Life magazines when you were struggling. Unfortunately, I haven’t seen anything like that around here but —”

“Can you bring me potato crisps?” Nora asked. “Really, any other food than that Food Product bullshit would be nice. Even two hundred year old junk food sounds better than eating that gelatinous slop.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He replied.

As he turned to leave she called out to him, “Nate, wait.”

He turned back to her.

“Thank you for being there.”

“I only did what you asked,” He replied, but Nora saw in his eyes that he was lying. Her gratitude made him happy. “Besides, I’m sure you’d rather have one of your boyfriends here instead.”

He was right. Having Nick’s quiet strength and Hancock’s charm would’ve sent her over the moon, but she also knew that it was impossible. But having Nate there wasn’t, he was a flesh and blood person who cared about her, and most importantly, he was there. “No Nate. I’m glad it was you. Having you there during the cremation felt right … it felt normal, almost.”

His lip twitched in response and then he bit at the skin around his lip lightly with his teeth. That was another nervous tic that had copied over perfectly from her husband. The line was becoming more and more blurred, she realized.
“I’ll always be there for you Nora.” He said and then left her room.

It took less than ten minutes before an impermeable cloud of grief and depression settled over her mind. She took the blankets off the bed, wrapped herself up in it like caterpillar wrapped in a cocoon and then curled up on an oversized chair in the sitting area. There was nothing to distract her; her cigarettes and weapons were confiscated, the room had been cleaned to it’s utilitarian roots (probably out of fear she’d hurt herself with something that was lying around, she reasoned), and the Institute’s radio only played classical music.

Dr. Li came into her room once to check on her. She paused briefly as if to consider how best to console the grieving woman but turned away without saying a word.

When the alarm clock on the nightstand read half past eleven in the evening, Nora hauled herself out of the armchair. She often slept on the couch or in the chair as sleeping in the bed still gave her nightmares where Ayo was hovering over her, but tonight she knew that sleep would be elusive no matter what she did.

Nora walked over to the computer terminal that was sitting on the blue-grey metal table and switched it on. The green, luminescent screen beeped as it cycled through its protocols and then Nora saw two options that read “Institute Server” and “Private Server.”

Nora navigated to the Private Server and she hit ENTER.

There were a couple of messages waiting for her, so she clicked the most recent one that was sent. The time stamp in the top corner read today’s date: December 13th

Blue, please send me a message back. I have so much to tell you! I was right. McDonough was a synth. That lying bastard thought he pulled the wool over everyone’s eyes but he was wrong. The printing press is nearly working itself into a frenzy as Nat prints as many articles as she can.

Also, Nicky wants to talk with you. That synth is persistent. As soon as you respond, I’ll snatch him up (sorry, was that the wrong choice in words?). Also, Nicky says, if you hold the SHIFT button for ten seconds, you’ll initiate a direct link with my terminal so we can communicate in real time (Isn’t that neat?).

Nora did as was instructed and the terminal let out a series of frequent trills until the computer screen went blank and rebooted.

A black curser blinked as it waited for her commands.

Nora tentatively typed. Her fingers struck the keys clumsily and she had to fix her message several times before hitting ENTER.

>> Are you there Piper?

She watched the blinking cursor for what seemed like an hour. Eventually, she could feel herself zoning out but then the terminal beeped.

>> Blue? Are you there?

>> Yes. What’s this about McDonough?

>> Oh my God, Blue. It’s the story of the century! But just wait. Nicky’ll be pissed if I don’t put him on first. Just wait, okay?
She tucked the blankets around her body and waited. It took almost fifteen minutes for the terminal to beep again.

Nora sighed. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine Nick’s furrowed expression as his synthetic and metal hands deftly struck the keys. He always had a knack with machines.

She almost typed “God, I miss you” but stopped. She couldn’t let on to Nick that she was suffering. He’d want to do something about it.

How are you doing, doll? Are they treating you alright there?

Yes. It’s been pretty hectic but I’ve been given more free reign now to explore and observe. I don’t feel like I’m in prison.

That’s good, but how are you doing? Mentally? Physically? I wish I could see you.

I’m fine.

Nick’s response came on the tail of hers. She could here the disapproving tone in his words.

But before Nora could dignify his response with another lie, he interrupted.

I heard about your son’s passing. Apparently word spreads quickly, even Institute news. Somehow Mayor McDonough caught wind of the news and called a town meeting in Diamond City. People were so up in arms that McDonough was an Institute spy that the crowd nearly lynched him. I’ve never seen Piper look so vindicated, but McDonough wouldn’t go down without a fight.

What happened?

He attacked a Diamond City guard who was tryin’ to keep the peace and was shot dead by the Diamond City security.

Nora bit her lip. She wondered how Hancock would react to this news.

So you wanna try again, doll? How are you doing?

Nora’s confession flowed from her fingers like water draining out of a dam.

I don’t know Nick. I’m grieving, naturally, but I’m also overwhelmed. I can’t sleep. I don’t know anything about science aside for what I can remember from my college BIO 101 class, and I have to somehow turn the most feared and hated organization in the Commonwealth into a moral paragon of sustainability and responsibility. I’m wondering if Hancock was right. Coming here might’ve been a bad idea, but I can’t back out now. Too many people are counting on me. I’m sorry that I left, Nick. I didn’t do it to hurt you. Please believe me.

I know, doll. I would’ve done the same. Is there anyone who you can talk to while you’re there? You shouldn’t suffer through this alone.
I have a few allies here. Don’t worry.

I always worry, doll. You know that.

Nora chuckled and she closed her eyes, sending silent prayers of love and adoration to him.

Doll, I also have news from Dr. Amari about Hancock. He came out of the coma yesterday. Dr. Amari is calling it a medical miracle. He’s still laid up pretty badly, but Amari’s been taking good care of him. She’s had him go a couple of rounds through the memory lounger to help his brain get back up to speed with current events.

What do you mean?

There was a brief pause before his words appeared on the screen.

He didn’t remember turning ghoul. That was a helluva shock for him. But he took it in stride like he often does. The news about Fahrenheit’s death was harder for him to take.

And his memory?

It’s coming back slowly. He recognizes me -- but my mug is hard to forget.

Nora rolled her eyes. She could already see his self-depreciating grin.

Does he remember me?

There was another pause, this one nearly twice as long, and Nora wondered if Nick got called away to do something, but then the terminal quietly beeped.

No. I’m sorry.

The permanence of that ‘no’ was damming. Nora knew that it was better this way. With everything in front of her — Shaun’s death, becoming Director, executing the raid on Mass Fusion, dealing with the ever increasing Brotherhood threat — she couldn’t have person at risk of being pulled into the voracious tempest that was her life. Besides, if Mamma Murphy’s prophecy had been right, then at least Hancock’s amnesic fate was the lesser of the proposed evils.

It’s okay.

It’s not okay Nora. Get pissed if it would help, but don’t take this lying down. Bottling all of this up won’t help.

Nora could feel the frustration in his words. She could almost imagine him biting down on the end of his cigarette as he scowled at her response. A second response came shortly after his first one.

I want to see you. I don’t care what you have to do. I’ll come there if I have to. The people won’t hurt me if they know I’m with you.

A knock on the door cut through the silence and Nora jumped.

“I’ll be right there.” She called out.

Nick, please relax. I’d love to have you with me but things are tense right now. When everything calms down, I will make some sort of arrangement to see you. Okay? Be safe. I love you.
Alright. I love you too, doll. Try to get some sleep.

Nora hit the SHIFT key rapidly five times and their chat disappeared from the screen. A blinking curser waited, ever dutifully, for her next commands.

“Nora, it’s me.” Nate called through the door. “Can I come in?”

“Yes, go ahead.” She called.

Nora rose from the desk as the door slid open. Nate came in with an assortment of boxes, foil-wrapped goodies, and four bottles of Nuka Cola.

“I had to bribe one of the scientist’s kids to show me where they kept the good snack foods.” He replied.

Nate put the food and drinks on the table and passed Nora a box of Sugar Bombs cereal.

“Your favorite, remember?” He replied.

Nora opened the cardboard flaps and tore into the thick plastic. She smelled the cereal tentatively and the memory of the artificial sweeteners and puffed wheat brought her back to their kitchen table in Sanctuary Hills. She could almost hear Codsworth’s idle humming as he prepared coffee and the dull drone of Nate’s sports channel recapping the latest baseball game.

“Are you okay?” Synth Nate asked as he tore into the foil lining of a Fancy Lad Snack Cake.

“Yeah.” Nora replied. “I’m just thinking about us. Our life back in Sanctuary, I mean.”

She tossed a handful of Sugar Bomb cereal into her mouth and sucked on the sugary coating until the puffed wheat became mush in her mouth.

“God, this would be so much better with milk.” She lamented.

Nate grinned. “Sorry, I couldn’t find a stray cow down here. It seems that the Institute’s been under a mandatory lactose free diet.”

Nora brightened. “Hey, you know they’re called brahmin now? The cows I mean. And they have two heads. That was a helluva surprise when I made it out of the vault.”

Nate swallowed a piece of sugary sponge cake and passed Nora a lukewarm Nuka Cola before opening one for himself. “You never did get a chance to tell me how you made it out of the Vault.”

“It’s kind of a long story.” Nora replied and ate another handful of cereal.

“Well, we have enough junk food to put both of us into a diabetic coma. And I’m feeling up for pulling an all-nighter if you are. What d’you say, for old time sake?”

Nora considered his proposition while taking a swig from her own Nuka Cola. After everything that had transpired in the past few days, Nora knew that she needed a moment — no matter how small — to disconnect from everything that was happening and relax.

Nate had always been good at that. With the world on the brink of war, and with the stresses from law school, her family’s expectations that she settle down and start a family (like a proper woman), and the never ending financial struggles of a couple of college students trying to start a life in the middle of Boston, Nate was always good at distracting Nora and diverting her attention to the things that truly mattered.
And there, with her son’s death fresh on her mind and with the Commonwealth wasteland standing on the precipice of war, Nora told Nate her story.

Chapter End Notes

My interpretation of Father’s death as happening as the result of assisted suicide is only used to show a different example of a suicide risk. Physician-assisted suicide and elderly euthanasia was a hot-button topic in the United States a decade ago, but I did not include that in this chapter to take a moral or political stance. I felt this means of death was poetic in a sense considering what Nora is struggling with internally. If you or anyone you know is exhibiting signs of suicidal thoughts, idealizations, or is expressing a wish to end their life, please consult the appropriate mental health avenues. If you are in the United States, here is the number for the Suicide Hotline 1-800-273-8255

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